# MATA VAISHNO DEVI

## Mythology, History and Heritage

**Sindhu Kapoor**

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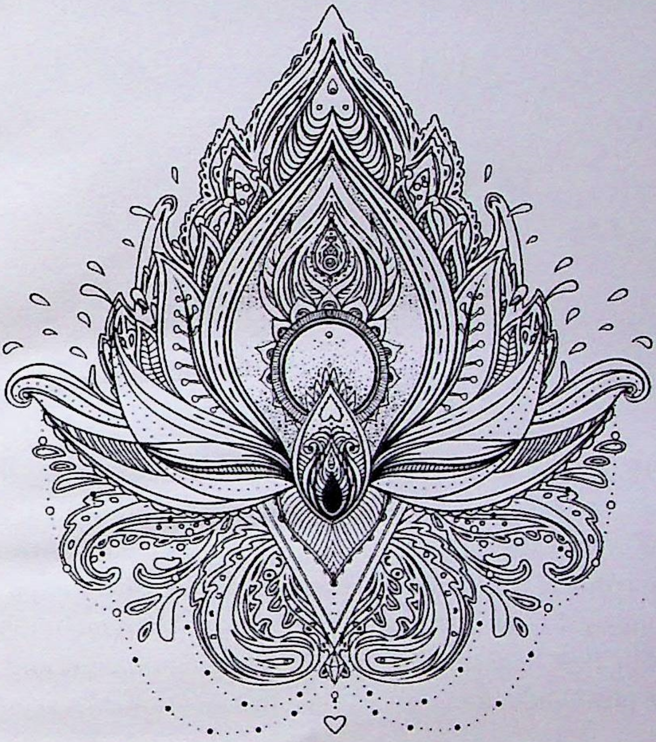

# Mata Vaishno Devi

## Mythology, History and Heritage

*Yaa Devi Sarvabhuteshu Maatrupena Sansthitah*
*Yaa Devi Sarvabhuteshu Shaktirupena. Sansthitah*
*Yaa Devi Sarvabhuteshu Shaantirupena Sansthitah Namartasyaih*
*Namastasyaih Namastasyiah*
*Namo Namah*

"O Goddess of the Universe, Visualizing you as the embodiment of motherhood, power and peace, I salute you, salute you, salute you.

# Preface

Shaktism denotes the worship of the Shakti and I find Jammu region the real seat of Shaktism. My present study on Mata Vaishno Devi: Mythology, History and Heritage, focuses on the prime female deity of the region, who today is revered throughout the world. Mata Vaishno Devi, nestled in the Trikuta Mountains, in the form of Pindis represents the unique mode of worship being followed diligently by her followers. Believers in her attach distinctive Iconography to her in her various manifestations, like on coins, photographs etc. The Supreme Goddess is dominating the local music, faith, oral traditions and food heritage; to be suffice, the culture of the region revolves around her. It is, thus, a matter of immense pleasure and pride to come up with a research work on the theme that shapes the identity of the whole region, besides giving new and Indian perspective to the imported theory of feminism from the west. It is but natural to bow in her honour for bestowing upon me her blessings whereby I could provide a final shape to this literary work.

I take this opportunity to dedicate the present study to the 'female shakti' of my life. All these special and peerless female force have contributed exceptionally in moulding my morals, career, thoughts and perception. I admire these women of substance who follow the dictum of *NAARITAV MAATRATAV NAYTRATAV.* I sincerely acknowledge their contribution and commitment to their family and society at large. My respect and regards are due to my mother, mother-in-law, sisters, my Guru Ma, my teachers and collegues, my fellow social activists at regional and national front, my dear friends, my nieces and above all, my doting daughter, Gauree. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Dr Vikram Singh Sahi, my husband, who happens to be my pillar of strength, today and always.

I wish to dedicate the present study to my beloved mother, Mrs. KUNTI KAPUR, who left this immortal world on 7th May, 2021, imprinting a deep vaccum on my mind and soul. An epitome of female strength, her journey is, but, manifestation of living life with humility, coupled with dignity. All mothers are emblematic of selfless love and divine emotion for their children, So was she. MISS HER. May the Heavenly Blessings of my makers-My Parents, Late Professor M. L. Kapur and Smt. Kunti Kapur and my Late Brother-in-Law Sh. K.B. Kohli always inspire and guide me.

With the deep fire in my heart, to foster the soft power of this Shrine's heritage with Outstanding Universal Value on the world Heritage Map and enlighten the humanity with the unique cultural Route from Katra to Bhawan, I, have endeavoured to highlight the cultural ethos and socio-religious impact that Mata Vaishno Devi's Shrine wields, both at regional and national fronts.

I express my deep gratitude and reverence to the Oberoi Book Service, Jammu for publishing the project well in time.

***Jai Mata Di***

***Dr. Sindhu Kapoor***

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# Introduction

The one fact which strikes us prominently is the extent of patronage extended all along to the pilgrimage to the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi, located in the Trikuta Hills, first by the chiefs and rulers of the Jammu Region through their admirable efforts, and subsequently by those of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. An outline of their territories and the landmarks of their history would, therefore, form a befitting introduction to this study.

## GEOGRAPHICAL DIVISIONS

The State of Jammu and Kashmir came into existence in 1846 A.D. It then comprised the Jammu Region or Province, also'called the Duggar Desh or the land of the Dogras, the valley of Kashmir or the Kashmir Province, and the frontier areas of Ladakh and Gilgit.

It's relief features have been compared to a three-storeyed house with the Outer Plain bordering the Jammu region as its indulating compound. The region of the outer Hills, comprising the long ranges to the immediate north of the Punjab, constituted the first storey. The altitude of these hills varied from 2,000 to 4,000 feet above the sea level. Next came the region of the Middle Mountains around Badarwah, Kishtwar, Ramban, Rajouri, Poonch and Muzaffarabad. It formed the second storey, and ranged on an average between 8,000 to 10,000 feet in height, though some of the peaks of the region were 14,000 to 15,000 feet high. The Greater Himalayas across the middle Mountains comprised the third storey. The ranges in this region varied between 17,000 to 22,000 feet in height and above.

It is, however, customary to divide the state into the following four natural divisions: —

(a) **The sub-mountain and Semi-mountains Tract:** It ran all along the line of the Districts of Gurdaspur, Sialkot, Gujarat and Jhelum of the Punjab. The Jammu District of the State formed a part of it. Besides two large streams, the Tawi and the Ujh, three great rivers- the Ravi, the Chenab and the Jhelum, watered this tract. Its northern parts consisted chiefly of foot-hills known as the "Kandi Ilaqa" or the parched areas. These hills rose to a height of about 4,000 feet.

(b) **The Outer Hills:** These consisted of lower hills, lying roughly to the south of the Pir Panjal, which separated the two main Provinces of Jammu and Kashmir, watered by the Chenab, besides a large stream, the Poonch river, the altitude of the greater part of this region varied from 2,000 to 4,000 feet, though some hills in Bhaderwah reached the height of over 5,000 feet. The major portion of the mineral resources of the State was found here, especially in the Riasi District.

The territories comprising the first and the second divisions formed the Chenab Valley.

(c) **The Jhelum Valley:** This division comprised the Kashmir Valley which included the District of Muzaffarabad also. The mountains enclosing it had an average altitude of 12000 feet. Perched securely among the Himalayas, the Kashmir Valley stretched about 84 miles from the south-east to the north-west, and had an average elevation of 5,600 feet and a width of 20 to 25 miles.

(d) **The Tibetan and Semi-Tibetan Tract:** Enclosed by the Karrakoram Mountains on the north and the central range of the Himalayas on the south, it was also called the Indus Valley division. One of its peak $K^2$ (Mt. Godwin Austin), the second highest peak in the world, was 28,250 feet high. Of the two Districts of Ladakh and Gilgit, which comprised this tract, the former was "the highest inhabited country in the world". Leh, the chief town of Ladakh, was 11,500 feet above the sea level. The population of the Frontier Districts of Ladakh and Gilgit together was 3,11,148, of Kashmir 17,28,705, and of the Jammu Region 19,81,433 in 1941.

## EARLY HISTORY

All these regions were, however, politically independent of each other before 1846 A.D.

For a number of centuries, Ladakh was governed by its own ruler in temporal matters, while the Grand Lama of Lhasa exercised spiritual control over it. But in the 15th century, when Tibet was overrun by the Chinese, Ladakh became independent in both temporal and spiritual matters. From the time of Aurengzeb (1658-1707), however, it was obliged to pay annual tribute to the Mughals, Afghans and the Sikhs successively.

Kashmir also was, by and large, an independent kingdom from the early times to 1586 A.D. Next, it formed a part of the Mughal Empire of India. In 1752, it passed into the hands of the Afghans. But Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab snatched it away from them in 1819.

The early history of the Jammu Region is, however, still not clear. But one thing is indisputable —that it was split up into a number of small principalities which included Basohli, Ballavar, Jasrota, Bhadu, Mankot, Bhimbar, Poonch, Kishtwar, Bhadarwah, etc.

## RANJIT DEV

A number of these principalities were brought under one effective authority for the first time by Dhruv Dev during the first half of the 18th Century A.D. His work of conquest and consolidation was carried on by his son and successor, Ranjit Dev. The alarming rapidity of his success naturally brought him in conflict with the Mughal authorities in the Punjab. Once, he was even captured, and had to spend about twelve years (1748-1760) in their jail at Lahore.

These were troubled times owing to the decline of the Mughal power in India and the Afghan invasions. Ranjit Dev was quick to improve the occasions, and, after his release from the Lahore jail, was able to extend his kingdom from Jasrota to Kaluwal on the river Chenab, and from Roras to Mandi-Kail in Gurdaspur.

By his tolerant, liberal and sagacious policy, he turned the Jammu Region into 'Dar-ul- Aman' or Abode of peace. Promotion of trade was the main plank of his economic policy, and soon Jammu became "one of the richest towns of India"

With Ranjit Dev's death in 1780, the kingdom of Jammu fell on evil days. In the Punjab had then risen a number of confederacies of the Sikhs, known as the Misls. Each one of them tried to acquire supremacy over the others, and often took to looting and plundering to fund their struggle. Jammu also became their victim, and none of Ranjit Dev's successors, namely, Brijraj Dev, Sampuran Dev and Ajit Singh, was able to with stand their inroads.

The Sukarchakias formed one of these Misls. In the time of Ranjit Dev of Jammu, its head was Charat Singh. The latter was succeeded by Mahan Singh whose son was Ranjit Singh.

Ranjit Singh was opposed to the policy of plundering and endeavoured to establish an orderly state. First of all, he brought all the warring Misls under one governism. Then he entered upon a career of conquests, and, by 1808, emerged as an unquestioned master of the central Punjab. Subsequently, he extended his hold over the territories lying between the river Sutluj in the east and Peshawar in the west.

## GULAB SINGH TO HARI SINGH

In 1808, Ranjit Singh, who had now assumed the title of Maharaja, defeated Raja Ajit Singh of Jammu also, and assigned this territory as jagir to his son Kharrak Singh in 1812.

In the battle of 1808, two brave and fearless youths of Jammu, namely, Mian Dido and Mian Gulab Singh, had fought valiantly. But after the surrender of their chief, while the latter went to join Maharaja Ranjit Singh's service, the former determined to launch a relentless struggle against the Punjabi rule.

Gulab Singh had the occasion to display his valour in many of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's military exploits. He distinguished himself especially in the campaigns against Kashmir and Multan as well as against Mian Dido, and his reward was the grant of the Raj of Jammu by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1822.

After Ranjit Singh ended his days in 1839, the Punjab was convulsed by divisions among his sons. While Raja Gulab Singh tried to keep himself aloof from the happenings in the Punjab, his two brothers, Dhian Singh and Suchet Singh, as well as Dhian Singh's son Hira Singh came to be thickly involved in them. Once in 1844, differences arose even between Gulab Singh and Hira Singh.

By December, 1845, intrigues and counter-intrigues had taken the toll of many of the Punjab chiefs, and finally led to war between Lahore kingdom and the British who had extended their sway up to the Sutluj. The Punjabi army was put to rout, and the Raja Gulab Singh was called upon to settle the terms of peace with the British. After some ups and downs, the treaties were signed by the British—the Treaty of Lahore with the Maharaja of Punjab on March 9, 1846, and the Treaty of Amritsar with Raja Gulab Singh on March 16, 1846. As a consequence of the latter, Gulab Singh became the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir State.

Gulab Singh's main contribution as the Maharaja was the restoration of law and order in his territories. In 1857, he abdicated in favour of his son, Ranbir Singh.

Maharaja Ranbir Singh was an able administrator. The State's first Civil Procedure code known as the Ranbir Dand Vidhi was framed in his time. Literary and religious activities received special patronage at his hands. When he passed away in 1885, he was succeeded by his elder son Pratab Singh.

The rule of Maharaja Pratab Singh was marked by vigorous construction activity. The Punjab was linked from the side of Jammu through a Jammu-Sialkot railway line, and from the side of Srinagar the Jhelum Valley cart Road ran upto Rawalpindi. The Banihal cart Road connected the two main cities of Jammu and Srinagar within the State. A number of canals were also dug up. Land settlement operations and the spread of western education were the other notable achievements of his regime.

Maharaja Pratab Singh passed into silence in 1925. His nephew, Hari Singh, being the only surviving direct male descendant of Gulab Singh, then ascended the throne. He was a great social reformer. "Begar" or forced labour was completely abolished, and Juvenile Smoking and Agriculturists Relief Regulation were promulgated. Primary education was made compulsory. First High Court and the **Praja Sabha** were also established.

## TOWARDS A POPULAR GOVERNMENT

It was, however, also in the time of Maharaja Hari Singh that India was partitioned, and Pakistan came into existence in 1947. Under the Indian independence Act, Maharaja Hari Singh had the option either to join the Dominion of India or Pakistan, or to enter into any agreement with either of them. But Pakistan engineered a tribal invasion of the State in October, 1947, with a view to bring the Maharaja to his knees. Hari Singh then sought armed assistance from India, and also executed the Instrument of Accession to India.

The Indian forces launched an offensive to clear the State of the raiders. The Government of India simultaneously complained to the Security Council of the United Nations Organisation against the Pakistani aggression. The Security Council ordered a cease-fire between Indian and Pakistani forces which became effective from January 1, 1949.

The march of events brought about momentous changes in the administrative set-up of tin- State also. First, a popular government was established soon after the tribal invasion. On November 12, 1952 was abolished the hereditary rule of

Maharaja Hari Singh, and his son Dr. Karan Singh assumed the office of an elected Head of the State called Sadr-i-Riasat. In 1964, it was provided that the Head of the State would be a Governor to be appointed by the President of India. On 5th Aug 2019, the people of India witnessed an epoch-making and historical event, when Home Minister of India, Shri Amit Shah presented to Rajya Sabha bills regarding the reorganisation of the State of Jammu & Kashmire into the making of one Union Territory of Ladakh. Subsequently, Article 370 and 35 A were also consigned to flames and were abrogated.

Thus, we see that the territories of Jammu and Kashmir had to undergo many fluctuations of fortune in the course of their history. How did these fluctuations affect the pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi would be discussed at a later stage. Immediately hereafter our study demands the understanding of Hinduism and the rise of Saktism as one of its distinct seels, leading to the origin of Mata Vaishno Devi. Quite obviously not only are these aspects interlinked, but also have a direct bearing on the main theme of our work.

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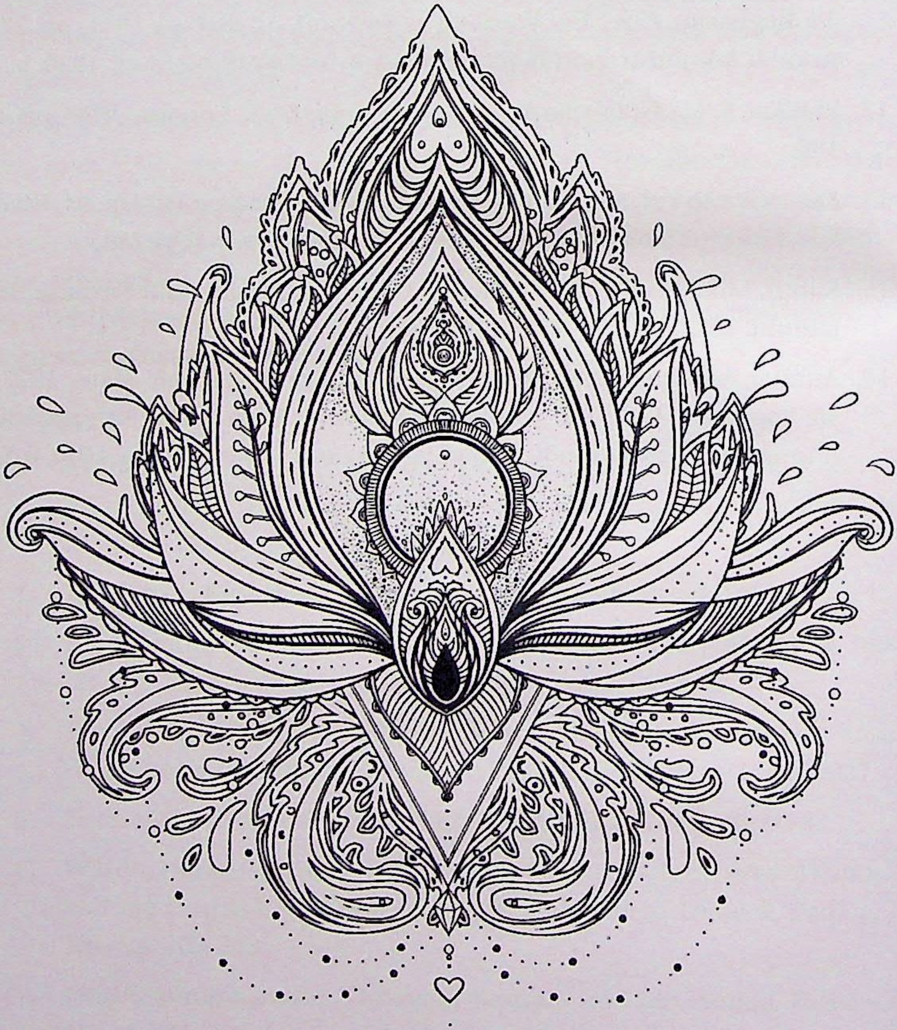

# 1

# Female Deities as Consorts of Gods

Hinduism is, in more than one respect, a unique phenomenon in the history of the living religions of the world but hardly can it be called a religion in the commonly understood sense of the term. Unlike most of the religions, it does not regard the concept of God as being central to it. Accordingly, it does not make any dogmatic affirmation regarding the nature of God, and yet Hindus are seen worshipping a number of Gods.

Notwithstanding all these facts, Hinduism has persisted as a distinct religious entity over the centuries. It has, no doubt, a number of sects, with apparently conflicting doctrines, philosophies and social customs. Bui there is also an undercurrent of religious unity among all of them; and this unity is clearly discernable in their common beliefs, ideals, scriptures, deities and peaces of worship as well as pilgrimage.

The Worship of female deity appears to have been universal. The goddess cults thus thrived in indent Rome, Greece, Ireland, among the Hebrews and other European countries. But nowhere in the world is the goddess worship as deep-rooted as it is in India. It can be traced as far back as the period of Indus valley civilization. With the present state of knowledge, however, it cannot be said with certainty which deities did these people actually worship.

The early Vedic or Rig Vedic people (1500-900 BC) also believed in this mode of worship. The Rig Veda contains many hymns addressed to the female deities. Important female deities mentioned in the Early Vedic literature are Usas Prithvi, Vak, Nirsti, Aditi, Saraswati, Ratri such other vedic goddess as Puramdhi, Parandi, Raka, Dhisana. who are associated with bounty and riches, and Ila, Bharti, Mahi, Hotra and Surya (Daughter of Sun God), who are identified primarily with the sacrifice, find only a passing reference in the Rig Veda, yet a new development was noted in the Later Vedic Age (900-500 BC) when we discern the germs of the later concept of the Goddess as the Mother and God as the father. This was the time when Goddesses gained importance as individual deities.

As there can be no progeny among the living beings without mother and father, Moreover, the mother is more understanding and more patient than the father. She is always helpful to her children. Hence, the creative principle is personified as the goddess and the protector and the creator as the God.

An example of the new development is furnished by Goddess Sri Laxmi, well known by the beginning of the 1st Century A.D. Sri and Laxmi were originally were two different minor goddesses. However, since both had the same connotation of prosperity, they were merged together sometime in the period represented by the Brahmaras and early Upanishads (3rd, 4th Centuries A.D.)

The earliest text eulogizing Sri as a Deity is the Sri-Sukta, which is a part of an appendix to the Rig Veda. Certain Symbols and qualities associated with her have persisted throughout her history in the Hindu tradition.

She is, shown as seated on a Lotus and flanked by two or four elephants. Since these objects signify fertility, Sri Laxmi has, accordingly, been associated with this quality. But it is chiefly being looked upon as the Goddess of fortune that she comes to be accorded not only religious worship but also the homage of kings. And as one interested in the continued prosperity and fortune of the ruling princes, she is treated as Raja Laxmi, the fortune of the kings. The moment a ruler takes to evil deeds and neglects his kingly duties, she deserts him.

The story of Sri Laxmi's marriage with Vishnu is thus related in the 9th Skanda of Devi Bhagvata. The goddess Devi originated from the left side of the Supreme Being. By a command from the later she split herself into two enchanting damsels, both equal in splendour, majesty, adornment and age. One of these was Laxmidevi, the other was Radhadevi. The latter married two-handed Sri Krisna. The former also wanted the same person as her husband. So, Bhagwan divided himself into two, Sri Krisna from the left side as a two handed person, and as a four handed Visnu from the right. Laxmi then married Visnu.

As the queen of the great cosmic king, showering upon man wealth and prosperity. Srilaxmi assumes the role of a model Hindu wife-loyal and obedient. She becomes one of the most popular goddesses in the Hindu pantheon.

Later, however, under the philosophic vision of the Bhagvata School, which kindled the worshippers enthusiasm in the Tantric practices, Lakshmi is called upon to act alone and independent of Vishnu who is rendered completely inactive.

Sarasvati is another telling example of this genre of goddesses. She is associated with a sacred river in the Rig Vedic times. But with the passage of time, she begins to distance herself from this connection or may be certain authors bereft her of this association with the river. Ultimately, she assumes the role of a goddess associated with speech, learning, culture and wisdom.

The Puranas depict her as a wife of Brahman as well as Vishnu. According to the Brahmanada Purana (Chapter 13), she was the creation of Brahman who gave her the name of Sarasvati, and ordained her that she should stay on the tip of everybody's tongue, especially those of the learned people.

The account given in the Matsya Purana (3.30-47) elucidates further. It says that Brahman takes to meditation with a view of creating the world. At a stage, his body divides into two parts, half male and half female. Charmed by his female half, named Sarasvati, he desired her, mates with her, and creates demigod Manu who subsequently creates the world.

But the Skanda Purana (7.33.96) describes her as Vishnu's tongue and to be held in his mouth. This association with Vishnu makes Sarasvati his co-wife in many myths and legends. While Sarasvati represents, for the most part, spiritual, ascetic or religious values, Lakshmi takes care of such wordly aspects as wealth, material power and fertility.

Sarasvati is usually depicted as having four hands and the most common articles held by her are a book, a lute (Vina), a riser and a water pot. The book associates her with learning rosary and science, the lute with arts, particularly music, and the other items with spiritual sciences and religious rites. Further, she is typically shown seated on white swan and clad in white clothes, which suggest her transcendence of the physical world.

By her very nature, she is not usually sought in the home, nor in the fields or Forests. Her presence is desired in schools and libraries which have a direct bearing on culture. Her motherhood is usually metaphysical. She is credited to have given birth to artistic creations by providing inspiration. Accordingly, she is said to have given birth to the Vedas in the sense that she personifies wisdom.

Ambika is a common epithet for several goddesses in the later Hindu tradition. In one of the passages of Vajasanevi-Samhila (3.57), she is referred to as

Siva's sister, while in the Taittriva Brahmana (1.6.10.4-5), she is said to be his wife. Elsewhere in the Vedic literature, the consort of Siva is called Rulrani. But none of these references is so detailed as to enable us to ascertain whether the deity named has any resemblance to the later and fully developed goddess Sati-Parvita.

The Kene Upnishada (3. 12) speaks of a goddess named Uma Haimvati. the symbol of Brahma Vidva, and one of the most common names by which later Sati-Parvati was known. But this reference does not connect her with Siva. She appears in the text as suddenly as she disappears. Her task then is to reveal the knowledge by Brahman to the gods. Yet she is identified with Parvati by the later writers.

It is the texts of the epic period that clearly associate Sati-Parvati with Siva as his consort. Still it is not until the appearance of the Puranas that we find the main stories and myths of Sati and Parvati explained in detail. Two distinct goddesses emerge in this fully developed mythology-Sati, the daughter of Daksa, who becomes Siva's first wife, and Parvati, the daughter of Himavat, who becomes Siva's second wife, said to have been a reincarnation of Sati.

According to the Kalika purana (2-4), Sati's intense desire to marry Siva is instigated by god Brahman, the father of Daksha, insulted him earlier. Another version is given in the Rudhra Samhita of the Siva Purana (2.11.43). Brahman is afraid that if Siva is not involved in the created world, the creation will lack auspiciousness. In other words, the world will not long last if Siva was not involved in its affairs.

Sati takes to asceticism. Her devotion casts a glamour over Siva. The two then marry, and retire to the mountain abode of Siva i.e., KAILASH PARVAT.

After some time, Daksa plans a great sacrifice. He invites all the divine beings of any importance, excepts Siva and Sati, for Siva's odd appearance and strange habits which do not find favour with his father-in-law. Sati is furious at that, and storms off to her father's house only to be insulted. Outraged at the treatment meted out to her, she leaps into the fire of the sacrifice, and commits suicide and fades away her eternity.

When Siva learns of his wife's death, his blood is up. He creates some demons to be dispatched to upset Daksa's sacrifice. The demons kill a number of people, including Daksa. Most versions of the story speak of the later reinstitution of Daksa, invitation to Siva to attend the sacrifice, and smooth conclusion of the sacrifice.

In some versions of the story, however, either before or after the reinstitution of the sacrifice, Siva arrives there, picks up Sati's body, and, racked with grief, roams about in the world, crying "Sati", "Sati". In fact, so distraught is he by his consort's death, and so grieved by the presence of her corpse that he tends to completely ignore his divine responsibilities. This state of affairs threatens the stability of the world. Visnu is then petitioned to end Siva's grief. Following the grieving Siva, Visnu spiritually enters into Sati's body through Yoga, and slices off the parts of her body, one by one, until nothing remains. When Siva discovers that Sati's body is gone, he recovers his divine senses and returns to his mountain retreat: The various parts of Sati's body fall on earth at different places. At each of these sites, & Pitha or a scared place is established.

Originally, it is said that there were only four Sakti Pithas in India. But with the passage of time, there number increased and finally we get a list of 108 Pithas in the Puranas.

The Puranic authors were this way able to integrate diverse tribal, and other goddesses under the umbrella of Hindu pantheon.

Coming to Parvati's mythology, we see that it is also almost entirely dominated by her association with Siva. She is primarily the goddess who is Siva's wife, who won him after great penance, and who persuaded or provoked him into creating a child for the sake of preserving the world.

According to the story told in the Devi Bhagvata Purana (9th Khanda), Kasyapa Risi got a son named Vajranga Sura by his wife Diti (or Danu). The Asura married and performed penance for a long time so that he might shed his asuric aspect. During this period, his wife was harassed through a variety of ways by Indra. Learning of it after he came out of his penance, he flew into rage, and again took to meditation with a view to punishing Indra. Brahman then appeared before him, and to him he prayed for the boon of a son who would surpass the gods, including Indra, in prowess. The boon was granted, and Vajranag got a son who was christened Tarakasura.

After his birth, Taraka also did severe penance. Brahman was pleased, duly appeared before him, and granted him the boon that if he were to die, it would be at the hands of a child who was only seven days. Thereupon, Taraka became arrogant, and began to play havoc with the three worlds. All the gods then complained to Brahman. He told them that if a son was born to Siva, he would put Taraka to death. To achieve this end, Brahman himself suggested a plan. According to it, Sati was to be reborn as the daughter of Himavan and Mena. She would be named Kali, and would do great penance to break Siva's vow of celibacy. Sati is said to have herself consented to be reborn to come to the god's rescue whenever petitioned.

So, a daughter was born to Himavan and Mena. Brahman did not want Taraka to know that she was an incarnation of Sati. With that end in view, he contrived to turn the girl black or kali. As she was the daughter of Himavan, which was also the name of a Paravata or mountain, she also came to be called Parvati.

The girl showed keen interest in Siva from an early age. She set out to perform austerities and penance. With a view to awakening Siva's lust, god Kama, on the command of the gods, tried to cast a spell on him with his intoxicating weapons. But Siva burnt him to ashes with the fire from his middle eye. Siva himself also appeared before Parvati in disguise, and tired to persuade her to give up her resolve to marry one who was terrible in appearance and uncivilized in habits. But finding her steadfast, he ultimately agreed to accept her as wife.

After their marriage, they left for the Mount Kailasa, the favourite dwelling place of Siva. A son named Karttikeya was born to them in a strange way. Also called Subramanya and Skanda, he killed Taraka and rescued the world from his oppressions. A second son completed the divine family when Ganesa was born to them later on.

The birth, death and re-birth of Ganesha as narrated in the Siva Purana (43.13-17) present Parvati as a powerful female Sakti as well. She is said to have created Ganesa out of her body's dirt. So that he can guard her in certain contingencies. Once, when she was taking a bath in the house, Siva arrives, but Ganesa bars his entry. Incensed and feeling restless on account of offended vanity, Siva cuts off his head. This puts Parvati off her stroke, and she prepares to retaliate. Several saktis appear at her command and try to lay their violent hands on whosoever comes their way. A number of gods, including Brahman and Vishnu, then intercede to alley her by sympathy, and she forgives Siva but only after he brings Ganesa to life with, of course, an elephant's head.

Siva and Parvati then began to live a happy married life. On some occasions, however, they indulged in small quarells. Thus, once Siva called her by the nick-name of Kali. Parvati took the remark as a slur on her appearance, and resolved to rid herself of the dark complexion. Accordingly, she took to austerities and did succeed in assuming a golden complexion, Gauri (the bright or goldenone) thus, became another name.

This account of Parvati identifies her with and explains her mythological deeds vis-a-vis her consort or husband, the great ascetic god Siva. So closely indeed has Parvati come to be associated with Sati that the Goddesses are usually treated as one and their mythologies eventually come to sound very much alike.

The Mahabharata uses the following synonyms also for parvati: - Ambika, Aryan, Uma, Bhima, Saialputri, Sialarajasuta., Sakambhari, Sarvani, Devi, Durga, Girisuta, Girirajatmaja, Mahabhima, Mahadevi, Mahakali, Mahesvari, Parvatarajakanya, Rudrani, Rudrapatni and Tribhuvanevari, in addition to Gauri and Kali.

But like Srilaxmi, Parvati also comes to represent certain philosophic absolutes. As this 'Sakti' or embodied power she becomes identified with the creative forces of the Universe and the underlying potency of things.

The term Sakti as understood in the Hindu theology means "The active dimension of the godhead, the divine power that underlines the godheads ability to create the world and to display itself. It has derived its roots from Sak which means "to be able to" or "to have force to do". In our context however, it conveys the meaning of power underlying the ultimate reality or the ultimate reality itself, and is identified with a powerful, active and transcendent female being, a goddess.

The Devi or the ultimate reality of our accounts is conceived to act independent of any outside help while performing her heroic deeds. Not only does she not seek support from any male deity. She also does not lend it to any of them. Rather, she takes power from the male Gods. They give up their inner strength, fire and heat (Tejas) to create her; and in doing so, surrender their potency to her. As, we know, the Hindu mythology generally attributes the three cosmic functions to Brahman (creation), Vishnu (Preservation) and Siva (Destruction). But here we note that these male Gods are made to act only according to the will and command of the Devi. She is virgin and yet she absorbs them all, resuming her unitary character as supreme Goddess from whom proceeds all creation, preservation and destruction.

As the popularity of Saktism scaled up, greater emphasis was laid upon diverse modes of divine manifestations. Even Durga came to have nine names, and the Puranas give as many as 108 names of the Great Goddess. While a god number of these represent mythical figures, many others were local deities' later indentified with the Devi

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# 2

# Legends Associated with the Rise of Mahadevi

Frequent fusion of Vaisnava and Saiva Goddesses also is marked in the history of Saktism. But while in the beginning they are associated more with Vishnu, later on Shiva comes to have greater influence over them. This fact has tempted some scholars to describe Saktism as an offshoot of Saivism and to identify the Sakti with the energy of Siva. The intention of the various Sakti Puranas, however, seems to us to portray the sakti more as independent, all prevailing power and the ultimate reality than to associate her either with Siva or Vishnu.

Before we proceed further, it seems to us relevant to comment here upon yet another important aspect of Saktism. We have noted that while some of the Goddess have a gentle form, the others have fierce one. Thus, while, Uma, Gauri, Parvati, Bhavani, Annapurana, etc. represent the former, Durga, Camunda, Kali, Katayayani, Bhairavi, etc. belong to the latter,. But in both forms, the goddesses work for the good of their worshippers, as do the mothers for their children. In the gentle form, they protect their devotees while in the fierce form; they work indirectly as the enemy of evil.

The Hindu mythology gives us several accounts of the origin of Durga.

The Vishnu Purana (4th Century) indicates that the goddess arouse from Vishnu as the power which induces sleep in him, or as his magical, creative power or Sakti. He seeks her help lo delude a demon king who is threatening the infant krisna. Called Ycca-Nidra. She is told thus: "Those who shall reverently invoke you morning and evening, and praise you and call you Arya, Durga, Vedagarbah, Ambika, Bhadra, Bhadrakali, Kshemi or Kshemankari, shall receive by my grace whatever they desire. And pleased with their offerings of wine and meat and various other kinds, you shall grant the prayers of mankind. By my favour, all men shall have perpetual faith in you, and carry out my orders". (5.1.39)

Similar account finds place in the Siva Purana also (Chapter-I). It asks the goddess "to go to the earth, and transfer the child (krisna) in Devaki's womb to that of Rohini, the second wife of Vasudeva, and after that at the very time of my birth, you should be born as daughter of Yasoda, wife of Nandagope. You should be worshipped by the world in various names like Ambika, Narayani, chandika, Durga, Bhadtakali, etc. The child transferred by you to the womb of Rohini will become known as Sankarasena, Balabhadra and Rama".

According to Sri Harivamsa (Ist-4th century), after commanding Yoga Nidra, Called Nidra Kalarupni, to become the daughter of Yasoda, Visnu told her that later she would be reborn as Kausiki, have a permanent residence on the Vindhya mountains; kill Sumbha and Nisumbha; and would be worshipped by animal sacrifices by the Savage tribes-Saharas, Barbaras and Pulidas.

In a similar vein, the Devi Mahatma, a section of the Markandya Purana (400-600 A.D.), also says," Thou art Medha, O goddess; thou hast comprehended the essence of all scriptures. Thou art Durga, the boat to cross the ocean of existence, devoid of attachments. Thou art Sri who has her domain in the heart of the enemy of Kaitabha. Thou indeed art Gauri who has fixed her dwelling in that of the moon-crested god".

Another account of Durga's origin finds place in the Skanda Purana (6th-7th Century). It says that once upon a time, a demon named Durgama threatened the stability of the cosmos.

Siva then asked Parvati to slay him. She took the form of a warrior-goddess, and defeated the demon. Thereafter, she came to be known as Durga (Sec 266-67).

According to Devi Bhagavata Purana (11th -12th century) (Skandha 5), once King Janame Jaya questioned Vyasa about the birth of the Devi. The Rishi told him that "even Brahma Vishnu Mahesvaras" (Brahman, Visnu and Siva) are not capable of thinking about the origin of Devi. How can I do it? Yet he offered to make attempt and said, "All the forces- everything-which appears in various names and forms are in fact Devi herself, her different manifestations. Just as a master actor appears on the stage in different roles from the delectation of the audience, the formless Devi, on behalf of the Devas, assumes many forms, and imposes upon herself attributes, though in fact she is without any attribute whatsoever. Thus, depending on her various forms, actions, etc., she is addressed by different names".

The best known account of Durga's origin is, however, to be found in the Devi Mahatmya (6th century) and the Devi Bhagavata Purana (11th-12th century). The account itself is presented in the form of a story comprising three episodes, illustrating the greatness of the goddess.

The story begins with a meeting between a king named Suratha, who has lost his sovereignty, and a merchant named Samadhi who has been cheated out of his riches. They go to the abode of one Rishi Medhas (or Sumedhas). The Rishi tells them all the world is deluded by Mahamaya (the Great Illusion) who has created the world, and who alone can grant liberation. She is eternal, and yet manifests herself in various ways to perform miraculous deeds. The two visitors are acquainted with these deeds, and advised to invoke her for the grant of their wishes. They do likewise, and are fully rewarded.

The first episode in the chain of Mahamaya's deeds pertains to the period before the world came into existence. There is then only water everywhere. Vishnu, sleeping on sea's serpent is floating in water. Brahaman, having emerged from Vishnu's naval, is seated on a lotus. Ear-wax flows out from both the ears of Vishnu. From this wax are born two Asuras or demons named Madhu and Kaitbha. They see Brahman recting the four Vedas. These Vedas they steal, which leads to a fight between them and Brahaman. With a view to seeking help from Vishnu, Brahaman petitions the goddess Yoga-Nidra or Mahamaya to vacate Vishnu's body so that he may awaken and slay the demons. The goddess, the personification of sleep, is also called Tamasi, the dark, sluggish force. Brahman calls her the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world. Prakriti (Primordeal Matter-Energy). Mahadevi (the Great Goddess) and Mahasuri (the great Demon) are two other names by which Brahman addresses her. Having thus been praised. She emerged from the body of Vishnu and, after a fierce battle lasting for thousands of years, he slays him.

The Devi Bhagavata Purana also refers to the death of Madhu and Kailtabha at the hands of Vishnu with the assistance of Devi, but with some difference, Vishnu is stated therein to have failed to defeat two demons in a straight fight because of a boon to them by the Devi that death should befall them only if they wished for it. Hence, he mediated on her, who suggested him to kill the demons through a deceit. Accordingly, Vishnu told them that he was charmed by their conduct, and wished to grant them a boon. But intoxicated with power as they were, they rebuffed Vishnu and asked him to beg for a boon from them. Quick was Vishnu to ask for a boon to kill them. Thus were Madhu and Kaitabha entrapped, and ultimately killed.

The second episode revolves round the killing of Mahisasura, a buffalo demon. Here the dynamics of the story moves from the cosmic orientation of the first episode, the more mundane activity of preserving order in the universe, and best illustrates the conception of the goddess as the embodiment of all-pervading power.

Rambha and Karambha are said to be the two sons of a famous king, Danu. Being childless, they perform austerities. Indra, terrified at their power, lays violent hands at Karambha. Rambha then prepares to commit suicide. But god Agni appears before him, dissuades him from ending his life, and, on asking, grants him the boon of a mighty son by a woman who wins his heart. By chance, he takes fancy to young she buffalo, and from their union is born Mahisasura.

In accordance with Agni's boon, Mahisasura is invincible to all the rivals, except a woman. He usurps the gods' power, expels them from the heaven, and deprives them of their share of the sacrifice, as the gods are unable either to kill or get better of him in a fierce battle, they approach Visnu and Siva for help. All the gods then put their heads together, and decide to create a mighty woman who forms their own part and possesses their joint power and glory. Accordingly, each one of them emits a great brilliance (Teja). From this brilliance of each god is born a figure with a dazzling effulgence. But in a moment, all these figures merge to form a single woman of exquisite beauty. Her face is made of Siva's energy, hair by Yama's, arms by Vishnu's, breasts by Moon's, waist by Indra's, legs by Varuna's, hips by Prithvi's, feet by Brahaman's, toes by Prajapati's, eyes by Agni's and ears by Vayu's. Similarly, the other parts of her body were developed by the energies of other gods

Each god then hands her over a weapon, or ornaments, or another emblem. Thus, Siva gives her a trident, Krishna a discus, the Himalayas a lion, Vayu a bow and arrows, and so on.

With a thunderous voice and her eyes burning with anger, thus created goddess proceeds to destroy Mahisa's innumerable forces, while her lion devours the dead bodies, finally, she encounters Mahisasura. In the course of the fierce battle that ensures, Mahisa assumes successively the forms of buffalo, a loin, a man carrying a sword, an elephant, and again a buffalo. Pausing for a while to guzzle the finest wine, and filling the sky with her eerie laughter, the goddess places her foot on the neck of the buffalo demon, and pierces it with her trident. The demon then tries to emerge out of the buffalo's mouth. But the goddess cuts off his head with a flourish. The gods praise her lavishly. They extol her as the supreme protector and boon-giver. They also plead with her to appear again whenever petitioned. She agrees and then disappears.

Waging a war is the function of the males. But here it is done by a woman, the Devi, or Mahadevi, riding a lion. This image of a goddess is difficult to trace in the Vedic literature. What to talk of her skill in fighting, her superiority in warfare is also obvious when we see her accomplishing what the male gods could not do.

The third episode moves even closer to the terrestrial plane. It takes place, after an indeterminable length of time, in the Himalayan region. The gods are once again in trouble. The three worlds and their share of sacrifice have once more been wrested away from their by two demon brothers, named Sumbha and Nisumbha.

The demons are said to perform penance so rigorously that Brahmans appears before them. When asked to choose their boons, they apply that "we shall not meet with death at the hands of males among Devas, human beings as also by birds, animals etc. in short, we should be killed only by woman; we fear them not". Brahman grants them this boon.

Thereafter, the two brothers wage a relentless war. Recollecting that the goddess had promised to return when prayed for, the gods make for the Himalayas to invoke her. They praise her as existing in all the beings in the from of such multifarious qualities as consciousness, intelligence, sleep, hunger, shadow, desire, power, production, modesty, patience, faith, beauty, conduct, remembrance, mercy, satisfaction, mistake and the mother.

While the gods are occupied in their prayers, Parvati happens to pass that way for a bath in the Ganges. She enquires them of the purpose which has brought them there. After she is apprised f it, there emerges from her bodily sheath (Kosa) the goddess Ambika. The latter is also known as Kausiki for her birth from Parvati's Kosa and Kali for Parvati turns after Ambika's emergence. It is she, tells Ambika, whom the gods are invoking.

At this stage, Canda and Munda, the two servants of the demon brothers, chance to see her. They report of her dazzling beauty to their masters. Their description kindles a desire in the hearts of the demons to possess her. Accordingly, the servants are sent back with a proposal for the goddess to marry either of the two brothers. Turning it down, Ambika informs the messengers that she had long ago taken a vow to marry only that man who would humble her in a battle.

Sumbha and Nisumbha then prepare for a battle. In the first instance, they dispatch their general Dhumra Lochan Raksa with a large army. But this army suffers a crushing defeat and its general loses his life. Thereafter, two other well-known generals of the demons, Canda and Munda, take the field against Ambka, and a bloody battle ensues. The goddess produces Sakti Kali from her forehead, with a frightful face, wearing a garland of skulls and tiger-skin, and laced with an informal weapon (Khatvanga). The latter slays Canda and Munda, and reports back to Ambika who gives her the name of Camunda for her heroic deeds.

As the battle proceeds further, seven Saktis (Saptamatrikas) emerge from the bodies of seven male gods (who seem to have been non-participant observers so far). These Saktis are the feminine essence of each god and not their consorts, and are designated in the Devi Mahatamya as Brahmini (from Brahman), Mahesvari (from Mahesha or Siva), Kaumari (from Skanda), Varahi (from Vishnu's boar incarnation), Narasimhi (from Vishnu's male lion incarnation), Aindri (from Indra), and Vaisnavi (from Vishnu). They are called Vibhutis or the excellent forms of the goddess.

The goddess herself also creates a Sakti, she is called Sivadhuti as she engages Siva to be Ambika's messenger to invite Sumbha and Nisumbha to a further trial of strength.

Then follows a dramatic event with the appearance of demon Raktabija on the scene. He has received from Siva a boon according to which if a drop of blood from his body fell the ground, from it would arise another Raktabija with the qualities and the strength equal to the original one.

In the course of the battle, Raktabija is wounded, and numerous are Raktabijas who spring up from his blood. To control the situation, Ambika asks Kali (Camunda) to lick off his blood before it falls on the ground. While Kali does it, Ambika cuts off his head. The other Saktis also assist Ambika in putting to rout Nisumbha and his forces. Mahesvari uses her trident, Vaisnavi her discus, Narasimhi her nails, Brahmani her Kamandlu full of poisonous water, and the other their respective weapons to destroy the enemy. Finally, Sumbha alone survives. He taunts the goddess that she is able to sweep the blood because she receives help from so many other women. Thereupon, she says, "I am one, where in this world is there anther besides me? Look, O evil one, as these manifestations of mine enter back into me." Then disappear all the seven Saktis into her body, and she defeats Sumbha single-handedly.

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At this, all the gods praise her. She tells them that she would reappear in the form of various incarnations whenever the world is threatened by evil.

The Vamana Purana also recounts these stories but somewhat differently. Thus, for instance, the goddess who kills Mahisasura is said to have emerged from the Tejas of various gods in the abode of Katyayana (vindhyachal), and is, therefore, called Katyayani (18. 8-21, 36-37; 19.1). She is seen by Chand and Mund who report to Mahisasura of her beauty (19.2-19). The demon proposes to her (19.22-28). Then ensure a battle between the two. Katyayani is also addressed as Ambika (20). Thus, a part of the third episode has been dovetailed into the second. It is repeated in the third episode as well. Again, the Saktis with whose help she kills Raktabija and Nisunbha are said to have appeared from the different limbs of the goddess herself, and not from the male gods. Thus, from her mouth came out Brahmani, seated on a swam and wearing rosary and water pot. From her eyes emerged Mahesvari, with three eyes, seated on a bull and wearing snakes as bangles and ear rings, and holding a trident. Kaunmari, seated on a peacock and holding a lace, came out from her lions. Vaisnavi, seated on Garuda, holding a counch, a discus, a club, a sword, a bow and an arrow, came out of her hands. From her posterior emerged the horrible Varahi, with a great pastle, seated on Sesanag and furrowing the ground with her tusks. From her heart appeared the aweful Narasimhi (woman lion) with fierce claws. Finally, Camundi emerged from her feet (56. 1-9). There is also no return of these Saktis into the Devi.

In the Markandya and the Vamana Puranas, we see the goddess in the terrible demon slayer form which is represented by Candika or kausiki, and subsequently by Kali. The goddess Kausiki appears to have first been associated with the Kausiki tribes, next with the Kuska tribes, and finally with Candika. Similarly is associated kali with Camunda. The latter is said to have got her name for her heroic deed of killing Canda and Munda. But, as already pointed out, Camunda cannot be derived this way, and that Kali and Camunda were two different goddesses. All of them were, in fact, taken over by Saktism from the surviving tribal deities.

The legend of Kausiki having emerged from the Kosa of Parvati seems to have been invented with a view to rationalizing the role of the tribal deity into the frame-work of the conception of the Devi or Mahadevi. The same argument would hold good in the case of Katyayani who probably belonged to the Katya tribe.

To carry our discussion further, we come across the assurance of the Devi in the Vamana Purana (56.61-70) that while dwelling in the Vindhyas, she would take birth as the off-spring of Yasoda to kill two powerful demons, Sumbha and

Nisumbha. Later, she says, would she incarnate in some horrible forms, such as Raktadantika, Durga and Bhimadevi, at different times to punish different oppressive demons, and as Sakambhari during a severe drought for feeding the people with life-saving vegetables which would grow out of her own body.

All these and many others were originally tribal goddesses.

As per Devi Mahatamya (6th century) Vaisnavi was one of the goddesses who form a specific group of seven Matas or Saptmalrikas.

In its derivative or relational sense, this name implies "one who is related to Vishnu", and our text amply affirms it.

The text says that after the birth of Devi or Mahadevi she first easily cuts down mahisasura. Next, she rushes at Sumbha and Nissumbha demons to relieve the gods of the former's oppressions. But in her fight against these demons, she comes to confront an insuperable difficulty. One of their generals, Rakktabija, has fortified himself with a boon from Siva that if a drop of blood from his body fell on the ground, from it would be born another Raktabija. So, when the goddess inflicts serious wounds upon him, numerous Raktabijas sprout from the ground. To cope with this situation, the unrivalled goddess commanding Kali to lick off the falling blood, while she herself is hitting at her formidable foe. Several Gods simultaneously create Seven Saktis to assist her. These Saktis inherit the form of the god from whom each springs forth. Our text calls them Saptmatrikas or seven-Mothers. Vaisnavi is one of them. She is brought into existence by Vishnu. Endowed with excessive virility and strength, all of them do their job exceedingly well. Ultimately, when Sumbha alone is left alive, he taunts the Devi for her dependence upon her female supporters with a quick response, she commands all the Seven-Matas to merge into her body and single- handedly she beats Sumbha.

There are some other accounts also of the origin of Vaisnavi. One of these, contained in the Matsya Purana (6th - 7th century). According to it, briefly restated, Siva initially comes a cropper against Andhaka whose blood, falling from his wounds, gives birth to new Andhaka. Then are created several Saktis by Siva, including the traditional seven, and they drink the demon's falling blood. Andhaka's power soon sinks into insignificance, and Siva gets the better of him easily. But his Saktis then take to a war path, and only Vishnu's male- incarnation Narasimha is able to discipline them.

The story of the struggle between Siva and Andhaka is repeated in the Siva Purana also. But the Seven-Matas are some other Saktis, who bail out Siva, are produced by various gods and not by Siva as mentioned by the Matsya Parana.

Further after the event, as did the gods go back to their abodes, so did the Seven-mothers, without making any fuss.

All these accounts find a place in the previous chapter but have been briefly restated here also for ready reference. There is yet another one contained in the Varaha Purana (9th century) with little variation. A little variation is found in Varaha Purana.

Once, says, the Varaha Purana, Siva and Parvati were occupied in gathering life's roses on the mountain Kailasa. There came running Brahman and some other gods with the report of grinding tyranny of the demon Andhaka. Appreciating the circumstances, Siva prepared to take up cudgels with the demon on their behalf, and produced through his metal powers Vasuki, Taksaka and Dhananajya Saktis for his help.

While fighting between Siva and Andhaka was going on, Vishnu also hastened to join it. Siva wounded his opponent, but numerous new Andhakas were born from the drops of his blood which fell on the ground. Siva then lifted the demon in the air with the help of his trident, while Vishnu discharged his disc to annihilate his duplicates. So that no more blood of Andhaka flowed down, various gods produced eight Saktis, namely, Yogesvari, Mahesvari, Brahmani, Kaumari, Indraja, Yamadandadhara, Varahi and Vaisnavi, to drink it while it was in the air. Soon did the demon turn into a bag of bones and died.

## NEW VERSION OF HER ORIGIN

According to it, once Vishnu, Brahman and Siva met, and looked at each other. From a combination of their looks was born a goddess of resplendent beauty. The gods asked her who she was and what did she want. The goddess, who bore three colours- black, white and red or yellow, was taken aback at this question. It were they who had created her, and yet did not know who she was. The gods then called her Trikala, the possessor of three attributes or characteristics, and asked her to assume three different forms in accordance with these attributes. She did so.

The form with white colour represented Brahman from whom proceeded all creation; that what red stood for Visnu who protected the whole world; and the black one was of Siva who causes destruction.

While the last named was laced with a trident in her hand and appeared fierce, the second was called Vaisnavi or Visnumaya and carried a conch and a disc in her hands.

The white goddess then set out towards the Sveta Mountain, the black one towards the Nila Mountain, and the red towards the Mandara Mountain for severe penance.

By name, while the goddess with the red colour was known as Vaisnavi, the white coloured was called Kkaksara (of one syllable) Sarvaksara (of alsyllbles), Vaqisa (the highest speech). Sarasvati. Vidyasvari, Amitaksra, Jnananidhi (the abode of all knowledge) and Vihhavri; and the black one named Raudri.

## ENCOUNTER WITH LORD RAMA

In imitation of the stuff and style of the Puranas, some scholars have woven a story around Vaisnavi and Lord Rama.

It is said that when Ravana and his fellow demons had made the life of the people on this earth a hell in the Treta Yuga. Mahalaxmi, Mahasarasvati, Mahakali, Savitri, Gayantri and some other goddesses produced a reincarnation of Durga in the form of Vaisnavi with a view to putting an end to Ravana's oppression. The mode of giving birth to Vaisnavi is emitted a Teja or brilliance from her body to form Mahasakti, a young girl of rare and dazzling order of beauty. She asked the goddesses as to what was her name and why had she been created. Vaisnvi was her name, and annihilation of evil in the world was her mission, she was told. To begin with, however, she was ordained to take birth as the daughter of one Ratnakar Sagar in South India.

In her human form, Vaisnavi, the daughter of Ratnakar Sagar, began to exhibit supernatural powers, and perform miraculous deeds. Soon her fame spread far and wide, and men began to throng to see her.

After some time, she sought her father's permission to take up her abode in a hut on the Oceanside (Niranjan Ghat), and occupied herself in austerities and worship of Sri Rama.

When Sri Ram happened to come to the South in search of his wife, Sita, whom Ravana had abducted, he passed by the side of vaisnavi's hut. On being asked the aim of her severe penance, she told him that she had set her heart upon him as a husband. Sri Rama was saddened to know this. He informed her that he was under a vow to take only one wife at a time, but promised that he would visit her again, after punishing Ravana, in a disguised form; and if she recognized him, he would marry her.

Latter Sri Rama killed Ravana, recovered Sita, and also did visit Vaisnavi again as an elderly ascetic.

But alas: Vaisnavi missed to recognize him. He then once again tried to kindle hope in her. He told her to go to the North, take her abode in a cave on the Trikuta Hills of the Manik Mountain, which was already graced by the presence of Mahalaxmi, Mhasarasvati and Mahakali. There, Sri Rama further told her, she would come to be known as Vaishno Devi, and, on account of her penance and austerities, her fame would spread far and wide. In the Kali Yuga. he would incarnate as Kalki Avtar and then definitely take her as his consort.

Accordingly, Vaisnavi, a Mahasakti and an incarnation of Durga has been waiting for ages in the holy cave of the Trikuta Hills for the arrival of Kalki Avtar.

Mata Vaisnavi and lamentably weak: A goddess created by the Tejas of several goddesses, including Mahalaxmi, Mahasarsvati and Mahakali, only to wish for a marriage, like an ordinary mortal: A Mahasakti, an incarnation of Durga, and waiting for ages to see her dream come true: Unthinkable and totally unacceptable is this picture of the one who is a great boon-giver to countless number of her devotees.

## KILLS MAHISAURA

To continue the account given by Varaha Purana. after Vaishnvi Devi arrived at the Mandara Mountain, she selected a place called Visali for her penance.

Once, across the gulf of years, her mind was agitated owing to certain reasons. As a result, there arose out of her hundreds of charming damsels, adorned with a variety of ornaments. For their residence, she created a city called Devipura, with wide roads and mansion of unmatched design and beauty.

Attended by these creatures, and occupying her seat as a queen on the throne, Vaisnvi Devi went on with her austerities. Meanwhile. Narada, son of Brahman, happened to pass that way. So much was he charmed by the splendour and beauty of Vaisnavi Devi that practically he was dumb-founded for a while.

The Devi treated him as an honoured guest. Later, he left for the city of Mahisa with a mischief in his mind. The lord of this city was Mahisasura, a mighty demon. Narada inflamed his passions to possess Vaisnvi Devi, but also advised him first to humble the various gods who were her great supporters.

Accordingly, the demon chalked out an admirable strategy of pressuring her through first persuasive and then frightening means, and finally using force to seek her submission.

In accordance with Narada's device, however, he began with an attack on the gods. With a large army, consisting of infantry, Calvary, elephants and chariots, he marched upon the Meru Mountain, the headquarters of the Gods. In the fierce battle which ensued, the gods were put to rout. None of them had the strength to stand against Mahisasura, who could assume any form at will.

Next, Mahisasura had his messengers sent to Vaishnavi Devi with a proposal of marriage. They spoke to her of their master's wisdom, valour and splendour, and also narrated the story of his birth. A great demon lady, they said was his mother. But she was turned into a she buffalo as the result of curse by a pious Rishi. By mating with another great Rishi, she gave birth to Mahisasura. Even gods quiver with fear when his name is called.

Little was, however, moved Vaisnavi Devi by the colourful description of Mahisasura's abilities. On the other hand, she tried to show to the guests what she was by demonstrating the three worlds within herself. Her female attendants further informed them of the Devi's vow of chastity from an early age. Back then, they returned to report to their master.

Persuasive measures having failed. Mahisasura ordered his forces to march upon the Mandarchal abode of Vaisnavi Devi. Narada again put in his appearance before her to warn of the impending danger. Not to be taken by a surprise, she also deployed her army of female attendants armed with swords, shields, bows, arrows, etc. she herself had twenty arms which she provided with a bow and arrows, sword and shield, conch, sling, discus, club, mace, spear, trident, etc. she also carried a flag, and rode a loin. But before the battle, she offered prayers to god Rudra, and he appeared to assure her a victory.

So well did the Devi's supporters fight that Mahisasura's men had to kiss the dust soon after the two sides confronted each other. Next followed a duel between Vaisnavi Devi and Mahisasura. It is said to have lasted for years and years to together. Ultimately, she was able to throw the demon down on the Satasringa Mountain, and cut his head off. There upon, all the gods praised her thus:

Bow to you, O Goddess, the noble, majestic, victorious and fierce, the root of all existence, three-eyed and omnipotent. Knowledge and nescience, mediation as well as the object of meditation, the destroyer of Mahisa, omnipresent, the master of all, universal in form, Vaisnavi.

Fearless, permanent, wit eyes glowing like the lotus petal occupied in holy vows, of frightening form. One who blesses with prosperity and triumph, light and darkness, who is immortal, auspicious, and energy of Siva, Visnu and Brahman, venerated by all gods.

Holding a bell in one hand, trident in another, the slayer of Mahisasura, frightening form, uneven-eyed, formidable illusions, one who oozes out ambrosia. Benign to all beings. The source of all knowledge, Puranas and Silpas.

Bow to you, O mother, laced with the ultimate powers, and familiar with all the secrets of the Vedas.

Bow to you, O magnificent goddess, spotless, pure, and the embodiment of compassion.

Refuge in you we all seek, O supreme goddess, as a result of which luck never deserts us in trouble.

He who recites this Stotra from the depth of his heart, has not to fear the ferocious animals like the tiger, the robbers and the angry lords, secures freedom from oppression, and leads a blissful life."

Thus extolled by the gods, Vaisnavi Devi asked them to seek a boon. The god beseeched, "may you be pleased to great all the desires of those who recite this Stotra of yours".

Vaisnavi Devi bestowed this boon, sent the gods off, and herself stayed on the Mandara Mountain.

The Varaha Purana closes this account of Vaisnavi Devi with the words," O Earth, he who is aware of this second birth of the goddess, shakes off his grief, and secures the eternal abode, free from all miseries".

## SUPREME REALITY

We might pause here to think if there were three Mahisasuras to be killed by three different persons at three different points of time. The same name and the same set of circumstances of birth with but little variations. In fact, suggest that he was one and the same person. This should not be surprising. The destruction of Mahisasura is allegorical, and what the various authors of their story want to impress upon their readers repeatedly is the destruction of evil at the hands of good, or the victory of the pious over the animal passions. The concept of existence of Mahisasura is, therefore, nothing but evil personified.

The same explanation holds good in the case of Andhaka also.

The kind of change in the role and status of Vaisnavi Devi as outlined above is not without parallel in the Hindu mythology. Referring to "the differences we notice in the personality of the Durga of the two Puranas, namely, the Brahmavaivarth and the Markandya and the Tantras or other works, one scholar says, "the same is the case with other deities. Some were superseded while others became more and more popular, and consequently their personalities as well as their cults were much more developed".

To sum up, by the time the Varaha Purana was composed, that is, by the 9th century A.D., Vaisnavi Devi had made much headway in her history. She had become one of the major female deities in the Hindu Pantheon, as the embodiment of an all-prevading power, the ultimate reality, the giver of boons, and the source of spiritual bliss.

The inarch of her popularity is uninterrupted thereafter. The Kalika Purana of the 10th - 11th century identifies her with Yoga Maya, Maha Maya, Yoga Nidra and Ambika. The Devi Bhagavata of the 11th -12th century calls her the supreme goddess, who creates, preserves and destroys the world. The Narda Purana of as late a period as the 16th -17th century also cues likewise.

The ever growing number of pilgrims, who include a galaxy of men, and who make a bee-line all the year round to her shrine on the Trikuta Hills of the Jammu Region, bears the latest and the most eloquent testimony of the abounding faith the people have in her.

But she is now called Mata Vaishno Devi. In the local dialect of the Jammu Region, where the shrine is located, the names such as Tara and Krishna come to be spoken as Taro and Krishno. Vaisnavi also, in the similar way, appears to have taken the form of Vaishno with the passage of time.

Prefix not only keeps continuity, but is also used for her as she is considered the source of all existence, production and nourishment, even though otherwise she is virgin. Hence, we shall also hereafter call her by the name of Mata Vaishno Devi.

## PANDAVAS AND VAISHNO DEVI

Yet another legend brings the Pandavas to her shrine, and thereby takes it's antiquity to the Mahabharata times at least.

PANDU, the lord of Hastanapur, had two wives, Kunti and Madri. While the former was the adopted daughter of Kuntibhoj of the Yadava clan, and the sister of Sri Krishna's father, the latter happened to be the sister of Shalya, the ruler of Madradesh, of which the Jammu Region formed a part.

A powerful king as Pandu was, he launched upon a career of Digvijay or world conquest, and devastated almost the whole of northern India. Then he began to lead a peaceful life.

Once, while occupied in a hunting expedition in the neighboured of his capital, along with his wives, he chanced to kill a couple of deer who was in a mating position. The couple was, in fact, the well-known seer kindam and his wife who had taken the form of deers with a view to avoiding public gaze. But before the seer breathed his last, he condemned Pandu to death if and when he would also indulge in sex with any of his wives.

Saddened at the whole event, Pandu made up his mind to renounce the world, and spend the rest of his life as an ascetic. But his wives would not allow him do unless they also were permitted to stay with him. Pandu yielded, entrusted the kingdom to his brother Dhritraster, and himself left for penance.

So far the account finds a mention in the Mahabharata. But thereafter, a local legend picks up the threads of the story and says that Pandu and his wives, after leaving Hastanapur, arrived at the Mansar Lake. After a short stay there, they crossed the low hills via Udhampur, the Charhai village, the peak of Hanskut, and finally reached Mata Vaishno Devi's cave shrine on the Satasranga Mountain. The first thing they did there was to offers prayers to the Mata. Next, Pandu, selected an Ashrama for their stay, and took to austerities in the company of numerous seers and sages.

Once, legend continues, the sages of the place determined to visit Brahmloka to honour the god. Pandu and his wives, too, were overcome by an irresistible impulse to accompany them. But the sages tried to dissuade them in view of the tremendous difficulties presented by the terrain and climate on the way. Pandu, however, misunderstood them. He thought that he was politely being asked to give up the idea as religion permitted no issueless person to go to the Brahmloka. The sages had then to reason with him, and also prophecied the birth of a number of brave and intelligent sons to him.

Subsequently were born Yudhister, Bhim, Arjun, Sehdev and Nukul, as told in the Mahabharata, but at the Ashrama near Vaishno Devi's shrine, according to our legend. The Children grew under the benign care of the Mata, while Pandu kept himself deeply engrossed in propitiating her.

After some time, Pandu died, and his sons left for Hastanapur. But before leaving, they erected five Pindis inside the holy cave in memory of their stay here. The cave shrine also was repaired and partially rebuilt by them. A folk-song is quoted in support of this contention.

## CHANDER DEV'S LEGEND

He is said to have been a King of Jammu, who had no issue. Once in the company of his wife, he visited Haridwar on a pilgrimage. There they chanced to meet one Mahatama Hans Raj. He advised them to perform Chandi Yagya for the fulfillment of their aching desire. They did so on their return, and got a daughter and a son, named Chandarbhaga and Chandrasil respectively.

After the children grew, Candrabhaga was married to a prince of Maheshpura, while Chandrasil was betrothed to a pretty girl. On the latter occasion, Mahatma Hans Raj also happened to visit Jammu. He met Chandrabhaga's husband, and looked at his face, predicted his death on the 7th day. But he also made it known that this tragedy could be averted if Mata Vaishno Devi was propitiated. Yet nobody took him seriously, and the misfortunes did strike the family on the day of predication. Chandrbhaja then vowed not be take anything till the Mata had brought her husband back to life. On the 10th day Vaishno Devi appeared, and granted her wish. Touched by the reverential gratitude. Chandrabhaga then made a place to the Mata to continue residing on the Trikuta Hills forever.

This is again a purely legendry account, for a king by name of Chanderdev ever ruled over Jammu. He is not found in the genealogy of the Jammu rulers given in the Gulab Nama by Kirpa Ram and G. C. Smyth's A History of the Reigning Family of Lahore, with some Account of the Jammu Rajas.

## BAWA JITTO AS VAISHNO DEVI'S DEVOTEE

We refer here to an event of not very olden times, which is though historically true, yet has been loaded with imaginary details turning it into a legend.

There lived in the village of Panjor (Shamachak), near the city of Jammu, a farmer named Bawa Jitto in the first quartet of the 15th century. Though poor, yet he combined in himself the rare qualities of a hard-worker and a man of principle, self respect and, above all, fair play. Little wonder, he could not put up with the oppression of his Jagirdar, Mehta Vir Singh, and committed suicide as a protest against his conduct. So much was overwhelmed his only young daughter by this tragedy that she also ascended the pyre of his dead father.

After a time, a number of scholars made Bawa Jitto's courage, some of the justness and supreme sacrifice the subjects of their study and writings. Soon he became a symbol of the struggle of the down-trodden against the oppressors. Legends also began to be woven around him.

One legend says that, pleased with his devotion, Mata Vaishno Devi appeared him in a dream, and asked him to seek a boon. He had no issue, and his village no source of drinking water. He begged for both. Vaishno Devi asked him to arrange for a cradle in his house. A beautiful girl was promised to take birth in it, and simultaneously would spring out water in his village.

Bawa Jitto did as ordained, and he got a daughter and his village a spring. A rich harvest of rice (but wheat according to some) also appeared on his land. But a large portion of it was looted and destroyed by the jagirdar's men. He then again remembered Mata Vaishno Devi, and she did put in her appearance, riding a loin. She wanted to know why he was out of spirits, and what could she do for him. On being told the whole story, the Mata promised to punish the evil-doers. But Bawa Jitto wanted them to be excused, for it was owing to their evil deeds that he had her holy Darshan. Nevertheless, he humbly made a plea that whatsoever partook the looted grains should have lesson for the generations to come. Mata Vaishno gave her word, and then disappeared.

The simple facts of the case are, however, that Bawa Jitto was undoubtedly a devotee of Mata vaisno Devi and had unbounded faith in her. Even today, jammiutis on the 8th day of the Navratras (Asthami) of Chaitra Month eulogies Bawa Jitto and his daughter, Bua Gauree's Supreme sacrifices & commemorate by organizing fair at Jhiri (near Akhnoor). Certain clans of Jammu region worship Bawa Jitto as their Kuldev.

## LEGEND OF SRIDHAR AND VAISHNO DEVI

In the last chapter, we have delved into a few legends associated with Mata Vaishno Devi. There is yet another which has substantially and so manifestly influenced the pilgrimage to her shrine on the Trikuta Hills that it eminently merits a separate and more detailed examination.

## FIRST VERSION

According to it, about seven hundred years ago, in the Kali Yuga. there lived a Brahman named Sridhar in the village of Hansali, now a part of the Katra town.

He had no issue, and to get one, daily he began to perform the Kanya Pujan or worship of the maidens in a particular way.

The maiden, who visited his house for the Pujan, were all familiar to him. But one day a new face of celestial beauty was seen seated in the company of others. She stayed back, while the others left after the Pujan. Before Sridhar could ask who she was, she herself revealed that a special mission had brought her there. But she kept the nature of this mission to her heart, and asked the Brahman to invite all the inhabitants of his village as well as the neighbourhood to a grand feast or Bhandara to be held the next day. Saying this, she disappeared like a spirit.

Sridhar was dazzled and puzzled. Who was she? How would he mange to feed such a large number of people as the stranger had asked him to invite? Still, so much was he charmed by her that he could not resist acting on her instructions. Accordingly, he moved from village to village with the message of invitation. On his way, he met a group of Sadhus or mendicants, and asked them also to join the Bhadara. Guru Gorakh Nath was their chief. He advised Sridhar not to invite him, for what to talk of him, even god Indra had failed to satisfy the appetite of his followers who numbered 390 (360, according to some scholars). Thereupon Sridhar made it known to Gorakhnath that he was just obeying the command of a young, mysterious girl. He accepted the invitation.

As the next day dawned, Sridhar was naturally care-worn. Gorakhnath and his followers, including one Bhairon Nath, and other invitees soon began to troop towards his residence. The mysterious maiden also simultaneously put up her appearance and asked Sridhar to seat his guests inside his hut as the food was ready for service. But how could his tiny hut accommodate hundreds of them. Yet he obeyed the demand of his benefactor, and in a mood of utter disbelief began his guests to enter his hut. There was no end to their surprise when they found that there was still space for some more men.

Then started the service of food by the girl herself. Everyone got what was asked for. When it was the turn of Bhairon, he wished to be served with meat and wine. But she told him that the host was a Brahman in whose house only vegetarian food could be taken. Bhairon, however, persisted in his demand, while she desisted. Then, violating all decency, he tried to grab her hand. But she soared way towards the Trikuta Hills. A languor or monkey is also said to have given her company.

But Bhairon was not the man to accept his failure so easily. He had taken fancy for her. So, he clung to his resolve with tenacity, and in s reach of her, he set out. Both stopped at a number of places on their way, which we shall describe later on. Finally, the girl made an entrance into the cave on the Hills, and ordered its mouth/entrance to be guarded by the Langoor. Bhairon also arrived there but only to find his way barred by the Langoor. The guard was, however, cut down by Bhairon. The young girl inside the cave then burst into an explosion rage, took the form of Chandi, laid her violent hands on Bhairon, and severed his head with one stroke. While the head of the dead was flung up in the hills, which came to, be known as the Bhairn Ghati, his torso fell at the entrance of the cave, and the large boulder there is said to be his petrified body.

The moment Bharion's Head separated from his body, his voice was heard crying, "Oh, the divine power. Jagdmbe, I repent not my death as I have been removed from this world by thy hands. Oh, Matasvari: kindly forgive me, otherwise I will be looked upon as a sinner and the people would come to hate me."

Bhairon's voice made this plea again and again, and the gracious goddess yielded to a view of pity. She blessed him with a boon after propitiating her in the cave, her devotees would worship him as well on their return journey, and that their wishes would be granted by this act. Accordingly, a temple was raised where Bhairon's head had fallen.

In the meantime, Sridhar felt depressed as separated souls. He took to his heart the sudden departure of the young girl owing to the uncivilized behaviour of Bhairon, and gave up his food. One day, however, she appeared to him in a dream. She told him that she was Vaishno Devi, took him to her cave, and showed him there the resting places of Mahsarasvati, Mahalaxmi and Mahakali. The birth of four sons was also assured to him

Sridhar had every reason to feel in the seventh heaven. Not only did he resume taking food, but also began to look up for the cave of his dream. One day, he did find it out, and so much was he swayed by the whole event that he made up his mind to spend the rest of his life at the feet of the goddess in the cave. Following him, the people of his area also started to put their faith in her, and began to visit her Shrine to seek her blessings.

After Sridhar left this immortal world, his descendents took upon themselves the responsibility of conducting the ritual of Vaishno Devi's worship inside the cave, and they continue doing so even till today.

## SECOND VERSION

There is yet another version of this legend. Briefly stated, Sridhar of the Hansali Village, who had no issue, took to Kanyu Pujan. Still his wish was not fulfilled. Dejected, one day he vowed not to touch food till Vaishno Devi herself fed him. Yielding to, this hard decision of a sincere devotee, she took the form of a charming maiden, and joined the band of other girls who had come to Sridhar's house for the Kanyu Pujan. As usual, all the girls left after the ceremony, but she stayed on. Who was she, asked Sridhar? She revealed her real identity, and fed him by her own hands in deference to his vow.

Subsequently, Vaishno Devi told Sridhar of her residence in the cave of the Trikuta Hills, where also stayed some other forms of Durga, who all were, however, represented by her. But the cave and the track to it, Vaishno Devi further informed him, had been in a bad shape for the last couple of centuries, as a result of which many of her devotees were attended by inseparable difficulties to reach her. He was, therefore, ordained to repair the both, and also to endeavour to spread her worship among the people. His reward would be four sons and the privilege for his generations to serve her at the cave. Then she disappeared.

The one major variation in this version is the complete omission of any reference to Bhairon. There is, however, another legend in which he figures prominently, but Sridhar is mentioned nowhere.

## THIRD VERSION

Earlier in the chapter, we have detailed a legend which associated Vaishno Devi with Sri Ram and ends with his advice for her to wait for the union with him till the onset of Kali Yuga.

Carrying this legend further, some writers say that Mata Vaishno Devi occupied herself in the spread of Vaisnavism in the territories of the Trikuta Hills.

When the Kali Yuga commenced, there appeared on the political horizon a devil king named Bhairon Bali. He became lord of the territory lying between the rivers Sutlej and Jehlum. Dead set against Vaisnavism, he came in Conflict with Mata Vaishno, who had by then, become the undisputed leader of the Vaisnavas.

Once, Vaishno Devi arranged a Bhandara or grand feast for her followers. Bhairon also joined it in disguise. Charmed by her beauty beyond all words as well as by the miracle of her serving the food to every individual's choice out of one and the same pot, he proposed to marry her. But Vaishno Devi simply sneezed at it.

The things then came to such a pass that both Bhairon and Mata Vaishno prepared for a war. The forces of the Mata, however, inflicted a crushing defeat upon those of Bhairon, first at Dcva Mai and next at Bhumika. With this defeat, the territories of Rishi and Salai, where now stands a power Dam, secured their release from Bhairon's yoke.

Vaishno Devi and her forces then moved to Charan Paduka and next to Adi Kumari where a dry water tank was filled with fresh water through her miraculous powers. But here she also came under a surprise attack from three sides by Bhairon's men. She fortified herself in a small cave called Gharbha Yoni, and commanded her forces from there.

In the battle which then ensued, Bhairon lost many of his men, including some generals.

With a blaze of fury at his enormous loss, Bhairon confronted Vaishno Devi at every inch of land thereafter. But two of their encounters at Sanji Chhat and Bhairon Top turned out to be so bloody that it became obligatory for Bhairon to suspend his aggression for some time.

Mata Vaishno was, on the other hand, so much emboldened that, in the meantime, her forces occupied Kishtwar, Ramnagar and Bhaderwah, and women administrators, Karthala, Pingla and Rajeshwari, were appointed to these territories respectively. Only the Sutlej area now remained under the occupation of Bhairon.

But Bhairon had still not lost his heart. He regrouped his forces, and launched his final assault on Vaishno Devi's cave on the Trikuta Hills. But here again he had to kiss the dust, and lost his head at her hands. While his torso remained at the entrance of the cave, his head was flung away at a distance. Overtaken by a feeling of remorse at his last hour, he begged forgiveness for his sins, and also beseeched for a boon to be remembered in the times to come for something good. Touched by tender feelings owing to his repeated entreaties, Mata Vaishno pronounced that whosoever would come to her Shrine for her worship, would propitiate him also on his return journey, and that only after having done so, would his pilgrimage prove rewarding.

Legends are after all legends, and can seldom stand the test of reasoning and logic, besides historical scrutiny. But underlying the present legend we do find an echo of an historical event.

Every student of Indian history is aware of the numerous plundering expeditions of Mahmud of Ghazni in the first quarter of the 11th century A.D., and of the subsequent establishment of Muslim rule in India after Mohammad Ghori had defeated Prithviraj Chauhan in the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192 A.D.

These were the most unsettled times in the history of our country. The burnt of the invaders' fury was mostly ruler of Jammu as early as 1192 (A.D) for the maintenances of Vaishno Devi's Shrine.

Very rarely legends conform to historical facts. At best they convey a theme or a massage, and while going so, their originators pay scanty regard to dates, years, places, individuals, etc. Their sole goal is to brighten the image of a particular character or characters by embellishing their account with all sorts of details. Accordingly, Sridhar must have not born about 300 years ago. But, according to the scholar himself, his forefathers, who, were Aryan Brahmans did migrate from Agra to the plains of the Jammu Region about 800 years ago. And this is what, according to us, the legend intends to convey.

## TRIKUTA DEVI

The legend of Sridhar combined with the historical facts help us to develop further the story of Mata Vaishno Devi. According to the both, there was a sort of struggle, about 700 or 800 years ago, between the non-Aryan local tribals of the Jammu Region with the Aryan immigrants. The Aryans, or more appropriately their culture, triumphed in the end, but not without a compromise to respect each other.

One may ask here what were the cultural conditions, especially the religious conditions, in the Jammu Region before the arrival of the Aryans.

According to a modern researcher, "Jammu Region in ancient times was inhabited by the primitive non-Aryan tribes who upheld primitive religious beliefs and are generally considered the worshippers of Phallus, i.e., Sishanadevas."

It would, however, be more appropriate to say that these primitive people generally worshipped certain geographical features as a manifestation of the sacred. A particular deity might also be associated with these, but it was the place or features itself which were treated as sacred, such as springs, lakes, rivers, mountains, their peaks, rocks, caves and any feature which was in the form of a phallus.

The evidence is also forth-coming of the worship of various geographical features in the Jammu Region since early times. There is thus an old temple of Camunda in Basohli. It lies between the town and the old place. Here the goddess is said to be represented by a piece of natural rock.

Gurnal, a village near Ballawar, has a temple where also the chief object of worship is a piece of rock which is said to represent Vindhyavasni.

About two kilometers away from Ballawar lies the well-known temple of Sukrala Devi. It is dedicated to goddess Malla who is represented by a Shila or stone slab which is said to have miraculously sprung up from the ground a few inches in height sometimes in the past.

Our belief is that originally the Trikuta cave and the three unique Pindis inside it were also worshipped as a manifestation of the sacred by the tribal inhabitance of the Jammu Region; this belief is strikingly supported by the fact that the whole feature dominated by three conspicuous peaks is reverentially addressed as Trikuta Devi. In fact, for a considerable time in the modern age also she continued to be better known as Trikuta Devi than as Vaishno Devi.

In 1847 A.D., Ganesh Dass Badehra, a tehsildar in the Punjab, visited Jammu. Referring to the Trikuta Hills he said it was "The abode of Trikuta Devi who is also called Baishno Devi." Very significantly, he further says that she was popularly known as Trikuta Devi, and that only some called her Vaishno Devi.

A number of European travellers, too came this side, or wrote about it, and called the Devi by a similar name, thus, she was addressed as "Trikuta Devi" by G.T. Vigne in 1842, "Tri Nokur Devi" by G.S. Smyth in 1847 "Trikuta Devi" by Sir Richard Temple in 1859 and in 1871, "Trikuta Mai" by Hatchison and Vogel.

Even a tri-lingual notice, engraved on a marble slab and put up by no person other than Maharaja Ranbir Singh in S. 1929 (1872 A.D.), by the side of the stairs leading to the main entrance gate of the Mata's cave, asking the pilgrims to make donations and enter these in the Atka book, refers to the Devi as Trikuta Bhagwati.

While listing some important local deities of the Jammu Region, such as Sidh Gauria of Samba, Sakrala Devi of mansar, and Devi of Kashtwar, the Census Report of India of 1911 speaks of Vaishno Devi of Reasi.

Ganesh Dass Badehra's reference, which says that Vaishno Devi was called as such only by some, read along with that of the Census Report of 1911, which describes her as the Devi of Riasi, would go to suggest that by the time the last century grew old, Mata Vaishno Devi had gained much ground.

If then Vaishno Devi was originally worshipped as Trikuta Devi, the question arises when were the two identified with each other. We already know about the tendency on the part of the ancient Aryans not only to identify one goddess with many, but also to embrace within the fold of their religion a number of tribal deities after a process of synthesis and compromise between the Aryans and the non-Aryans had started.

This seems to have been set in motion in the Jammu Region around the time when the three Pandis inside the Trikuta cave began to be worshipped as Mahasarasvati, Mahalaxmi and Mahakali, that is, between the 9th and 12th centuries. But the facts, which catch us by the throat, show that even thereafter for years to come she was better known as Trikuta Devi than as Vaishno Devi.

Does not it look strange that the well-known mid-12th century historian of Kashmir, who hands out in his work, Rajatarangini, lot of information about the territories around Jammu such as Babor, Chamba. Ballawar, Rajouri and Poonch, is totally silent about Jammu itself as well as about Trikuta or Vaishno Devi. The absence of any reference to the Shrine of Vaishno Devi on the Trikuta Hills becomes all the more significant when we note, as that Vaishno Devi was being worshipped in Kashmir since early times, and Kalhana knew much about her.

According to G.C. Smyth, even before the Battle of Tarain in 1192, some Aryans had immigrated to the Jammu Region. Because of their superior culture, they must have tried to spread it. And the early identification, of Trikuta Devi with Vaishno Devi must have been their contribution.

The legend of Sridhar clearly reveals that very few Aryans and others then, about 7 or 8 hundred years ago, went on a pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi's Shrine. In the Mata's own words, to Sridhar, her Shrine and the track to it were battered, and he was asked to take care of these.

So, by all accounts, the popularity of the cult of Mata Vaishno Devi seems to have received the real boost in the Jammu Region with the substantial immigration of the Aryans after the 12th century, even though she continued to be addressed as Trikuta Devi in reference to the old tribal sentiments of the people of this area.

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1. Siva Purana. Uma Samahita, 17-50.
2. Markandya Purana, (Devi Mahatmaya), 82.
3. Devi Bhagavata Purana. Skanda I, 4-5

   The Myth of Visnu Killing Madhi & Kaitabha was already known. In the Mahabharte, for instance, Visnu is known as Madhusudan (the killer of Madhu). But in the Devi Mahatyma and Devi Bhagavata. Visnu's capacity to act is shown as dependent upon the goddess Yognidra and the Devi respectively.

4. Markandya Purana, (Devi Mahatyma ), 83-85, Devi Baghvata Purana, Skand 6, 1-9.

5. According to Siva Purana, Sumbha and Nisumbha had asked for their end specifically at the hands of a female descendent of Parvati (Vayaviya Samhita, 10.17-24).

6. According to Varaha Purana, however the name Camunda was given to the goddess Rudrani for having killed demon Ruru and having raised the Rund and Mund parts of his body at the point of her spear (Purva Paksh-Srishti Uttapati Aur Vistar).

   The Siva Purana having written with the clear objective of promoting Saivism calls the goddess as Uma and says that she alone kills Cand, Mund and Raktabija (Uma Samhita, 14.47)

   But in the opinion of N.N. Bhatacharya (op.cit., p.76), Camunda and Kali were two different goddesses as grammatically Camunda cannot be derived from Canda-Munda.

7. Markandya Purana (Devi Mahatmya), 86-88; Devi Bhagavata Purana, Skanda 5, 11-13.

8. The account gives in the Skand Purana (sec.40) is also, by a large, similar to that is the Vainana Purana.

9. Bhattacharya, N.N; op. cit., p. 74-78.

10. Rao, T. A. Gopinath, Elements of Hindu Iconography Vol. I, Part II, Delhi, 1968, p.400.

11. Hazra, R. C., Studies in the Puranas, Calcutta, 1963., Vol. 1, p. 238., VOl1 II, pp 33-238, 245, 246-47.

12. Varaha Purana, 27. 1-43.

    At a later stage, Varaha Purana says that she was "triplicated" by Shiva alone (91.1. 6)

    Sharma, B. K., Vaishno Devi Ki Puri Kahani. Jammu n.d., pp. 6-10;

    Sampuran Kahani Vaishno Devi. Jammu n.d., pp. 6-10.

    Teeno Yugon Mein Sheranwali. Jammu, n.d., pp. 76-82;

    Chaturvedi, Jawali Prasad, Mata Vaishno Devi Jammu, n.d., pp. 73-75.

    In another of his works, Janam Katha Vaishno Mata, n.d., p. 33, B. K. Sharma says that her father first named as Vaisnavi. (see also Chaturvedi, Jawala Prasad, Mata Vaishno Devi; Darshan Aur Nai Deviyun Ki Katha, Jammu, n.d., p-4-6; Nau Deviyun Ki Amar Kahani, Jammu, n.d., pp. 58-59); Vaishno Devi Ki Sampuran Kahani, Jammu, n.d., pp. 4-6).

But Jawala Prasad Chaturvedi gives Trikula also as her name in another of his works Mata Vaishno Devi Ki Sampuran Yatra. Jammu, n.d., p.s.

13. Varaha Purana. 92.1-36.

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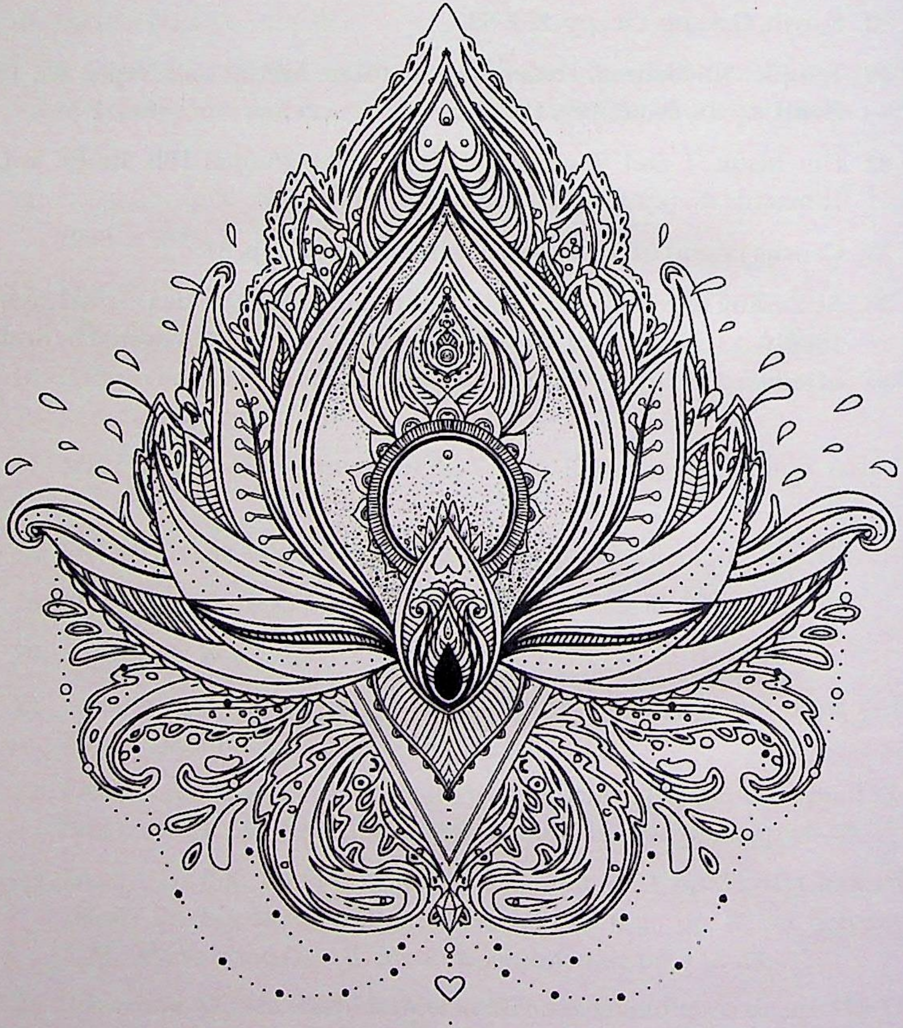

# 3

# Pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi Shrine

Tirath Yatras or pilgrimage to holy places, forms an important element of the Hindu religion. Little wonder, the whole of India has come to be dotted with such places which attract millions of devotees from far and near.

The powerful pull of this pilgrimage has been felt since very early times. The Mahabharata devotes a separate section on pilgrimage, called Tiratha-Yatra Parva. More elaborately, this institution is however, dealt with in the Puranas, The Matsya. The vamana and the Bhagavata Puranas contain detailed lists of the Tirathas found in all parts of this vast country

Such wide distributions of the Tirthas, which belong to different religious sects, generate a huge net-work of socio-religion circulation, encompassing a very large proportion of the Hindu population. Those who tend to emphasize the linguistic, geographical, regional and social diversity of India, often forget the integrately role the Tirthas and the pilgrimage play. It is rightly pointed out that these institutions have "created an essentially continuous sacred geography in which various regional, cultural diversities become less significant for the movement of pilgrims over long distances"

The term pilgrimage or more appropriately Tirath Yatra, however, carries a much wider connotation in the Hindu context than a mere journey to a sacred place. The Skand Purana, for instance, says, "Truth, forgiveness, control of senses, kindness to all human beings and simplicity are Tirthas.'" Thus, not only does the Tirth Yatra mean the physical act of visiting the holy places, but it also implies a mental or moral discipline. The latter aspect, in fact, forms the soul of the institution of pilgrimage.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF PILGRIMAGE

The four dominant ideas of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksa, occupies the mind of every Hindu imbibed with religious feelings. The first three aspects of life lead to the coverage of ultimate aim and the spiritual bliss. And Hinduism offers a wide variety of courses to achieve this end. These include the path of knowledge, Jnana Yoga, the course of action, Karma Yoga, and the mode of unalloyed devotion, Bhakti Yoga.

Tirath Yatra is also recognized as one of the paths leading towards the spiritual bliss, though it stands no comparison to the three above mentioned courses. It provides to the householder with an opportunity to detach himself for some time from the cares of daily life, and devote that time to prayers and contemplation, and give his ears to spiritual discourses of saints, sages and seers.

Understanding of the Rig Veda reveals that the Vedic people revered the rivers. They must have undertaken journeys to them with a view to earning religious merit. The practice definitely became popular during the epic period. This becomes evident from the description of a number of Tirath Yatras in the Mahabharata.

It is, however, during the Puranic period that pilgrimage was glorified, and placed on a higher pedestal among the Hindu beliefs than in any period of time before. There is hardly a Purana which touches not this topic and yields not a long list of the Tirathas.

The practice persisted, thereafter, with greater vigour despite hindrances consequent upon the establishment of the foreigner's rule in India, starting with the Battle of Tarain in 12th Century. Today, more people visit more sacred places than ever before in our country.

## MOTIVES OF PILGRIMAGE

The purpose and motives which impel the people to undertake a pilgrimage are, however, diverse. The accumulation of religious merit and purification of soul is one. Few people would, however, overtly admit of it. Nevertheless, there are often implicit undertones of this objective of their undertakings.

Secondly, the natural craving in a religious person is not only to live in sacred surroundings, but also to identify himself with them; and no place other than a sacred one answers this call. The religious literature of the Hindus is, in fact, replete with the expressions of this idea.

The ritualistic aspect of this objective may demand from a pilgrim the worship of the deity, bathing in a sacred lake or river, distribution of alms, attending the discourses of holy men, singing of or listening to religious songs, and the performance of other rituals in accordance with the requirements of the place and occasion.

Thirdly, the pilgrimage to a certain place might be made for a specific purpose concerning the mundane existence, such as the performance of a Sradha or the ceremonies for the dead, consigning his ashes to the holy waters, investure with a sacred thread, first hair-cut of a male child, called Mundana, and the like.

Besides, the ceremonial objectives, this category may also include the desire to have male child, marriage, profits from business enterprises, richer crops, favourable verdicts in court cases, and so on.

The vows that a pilgrim makes and the rituals or ceremonies that he goes through form the various devices to ensure the fulfillment of his wishes. Some deities and sacred places have indeed acquired special reputation for such purposes.

Lastly, the pilgrimage to sacred places carries some social value for the masses, especially the back-ward and down-trodden. They might be treated with scant respect and regard in the locality of their residence in a town or a village by the higher class people. But all the distinctions of caste and class melt away once they embark on a pilgrimage which admits of no such restrictions. In the rush of the pilgrims, it is, in fact, practically impossible to distinguish one from the other on the basis of caste. The king and the cobbler stand in the same queue to have a holy glimpse of the deity and to receive the Prasada (the food offered to the deity first, and then distributed among the devotees) from the same hand. This fact instills in the minds of all-high and low- a sense of equality, and thereby promotes national integration.

To conclude in the words of a scholar, "thus the institution of pilgrimage is undeniably a most powerful instrument of mass education in nationalism and patriotism. It develops in the people the geographical sense which enables them to feel the immensity of their mother-country pulsating with a common life from end to end in vast area". Pilgrimage has also made travelling a national habit in India inspite of its hardships in the days of premechanical transport. But its very difficulties added to its educative value in giving to travellers a deeper knowledge of the country than is possible to modern globle trotters or flying visitors. At the same time, the severities of the old world traveling were very much mitigated by the breaks of the pilgrims progress at holy halting places at short intervals such as myriads of village temples on its routes.

## MAJESTY OF MATA'S SHRINE

Thus, we see that pilgrimage to sacred places offers the reward of purification of the soul and attainment of objectives related to the problems of mundane existence. Mata Vaishno Devi's shrine located in a cave of the Trikuta Hills of the Jammu region is today one of the foremost places of pilgrimage in India. It lies 61 kilometers to the north of the city of Jammu at a height of 52, 00 feet from the sea level.

## HOW OLD IS THIS SHRINE

Unfortunately, no old inscription in or around the shrine is available to throw light on this, question. There is also no old image of the deity, the making or form of which could have piloted us in this direction. To quote a scholar who has conducted research on the Sakti Shrines of the Jammu region "no clear reference to the shrine or cave is to be found in the most important accounts of pilgrimage given by Bhramarsihi, Pulstya Bhumya and lomasla or other yatras itineries mentioned in the epic of Mahabharta"

### The Three Pindis

The cave shrine has three Pandis or stone outcroppings which are said to represent the three cosmic forms of sakti, i.e. Mahalaxmi, Mahasarasvati and Mahakali, and all the three collectively are identified with Mata Vaishno Devi.

The trikuta hills on which are located the cave shrine is called as such because of their three peaks which are more prominent than others. These hills are formed mostly of limestone and fresh water flow as through their limestone terrain. It is the movement of this water underground which has given rise to the formation of several springs in the area. Several geographical studies have been conducted to determine the age of the Trikuta Hills, and according to the latest one, it ranges between 5 to 6 billion years (pre-Cambrian Age). The cave and the Pindis were formed at a later date.

Now, the pindis might have emerged as a result of a miracle or through a geographical process. In either case, the gordian knot for us would be solved only if we know when these pindis did begin to be worshipped in the cave.

However, the pindis have been identified with the female trinity of Mahalaxmi Mahasarasvati and Mahakali. We have briefly outlined the process through which various Saktis coalesced into one form Mahadevi.

The Mahabharata, the Devi and the Kalika Puranas describe the Devi or Mahadevi as a maiden (kumari). She has four hands, three eyes, very bright complexion and wearing red clothes and red garland. She holds a noose and a good in two of her hands and Bestows boon and safety with the other two wealth and pelp, marriage and children, transfer and promotion, and the like material requirements of life. But the longing for her holy sight, short of any mundane desire, or mental peace alone amidst serene surroundings of her shrine, or simply earning the religious merit, from no less important ingredients of this pilgrimage than the others. There is, however, no practice to perform here such ceremonies as Mundans, tonsure, Sradhas and the like.

Among the pilgrims are old and young, men and women, rich and poor, high and low, civilians and soldiers, and persons from every clime and region of India. Neither rain, nor cold, nor heat deters them from their determination to get at her Shrine.

The Presidents of India, Sh. Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy and Sh. R. Venketaraman, Smt. Pratibha Patil, Sh. Ram Covind, Sh A.P. J. Abul Kalam the Vice-President of India, Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma, the Prime Ministers of India. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Sh. Narendra Modi several Cabinet Ministers of the Central Government, Chief Ministers of Various States and their colleagues, politicians of note, Chief Justices of the Supreme court and various High Court and their colleagues, naval, air-force and army commanders, film actors, and business tycoons, among other dignitaries, have prostrated themselves before her at one time or the other.

All firmly believe that Mata Vaishno Devi is benign, benevolent, bountiful, gracious and ever amenable to their prayers. But a belief among them also persists that it is only when the Mata calls or wishes that one ventures to visit her shrine. To some she appears in dreams to make a call, while others are induced by the firm conviction of her devotees.

Forty-eight kilometers north of Jammu lay the town of Katra. The abode of Vaishno Devi lies about 14 kilometers ahead, on the Trikuta Hills, at a height of 5,200 feet above the sea-level. It is reached by an arduous climb. The effort the pilgrim puts in, to traverse the distance kindles in him a sense of mission. The scenic splendour on the way, and the chanting of "Jai Mata Di" by an unending stream of pilgrims, going up or coming down, leave a strange electrifying effect on them, which language is inadequate to explain. There takes place almost a complete transformation of one's body and soul, which turn into a holy and serene entity. His mind is freed from all kinds of pride and ego, and he is completely lost in a reverie of gratitude to the divine.

The echo of the Mata's imparts strength to all. When one invokes the fellow-pilgrims to extol her by saying "Prem Se Bolo," they heartily respond with "Jai Mata Di" "Sare Bolo", and they reply, "Jai Mata Di". Soon the whole atmosphere rapturously resounds with the chants of Millke Bolo Jai Mata Di", "Zore Se Bolo-Jai Mata Di", "Main Nehin Sunya-Jia Mata Di", "Pichhle Bolo- Jai Mata Di", "Agle Bolo-Jai Mata Di", "Jaikra Sheranwali Di - Bol Sanche Darbar Ki Jai".

## EARLY HISTORY

Initially, pilgrimage to her Shrine was confined to the local people for a considerable period in the beginning. Gradually, her fame spread to the other parts of the Jammu Region, and the volume of this pilgrimage began to expand.

In the ancient times, the Jammu Region was split up into number of small principalities. Chiefs of some of these principalities are said to have occasionally undertaken pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi's Shrine. Thus, according to a modern work of 1967, Raja Kirti Dhar of Jammu paid a call to the Devi in the 7th century for the atonement of his sins. He is further said to have brought from the Shrine an icon of Vaishno Devi for her daily worship in his palace at Jammu. At the prima-facie, this statement cannot be authenticated as a reference to the 7th century as it has been given by a work of the 20lh century without any authentic corroboration and hence cannot be accepted at the very face of it.

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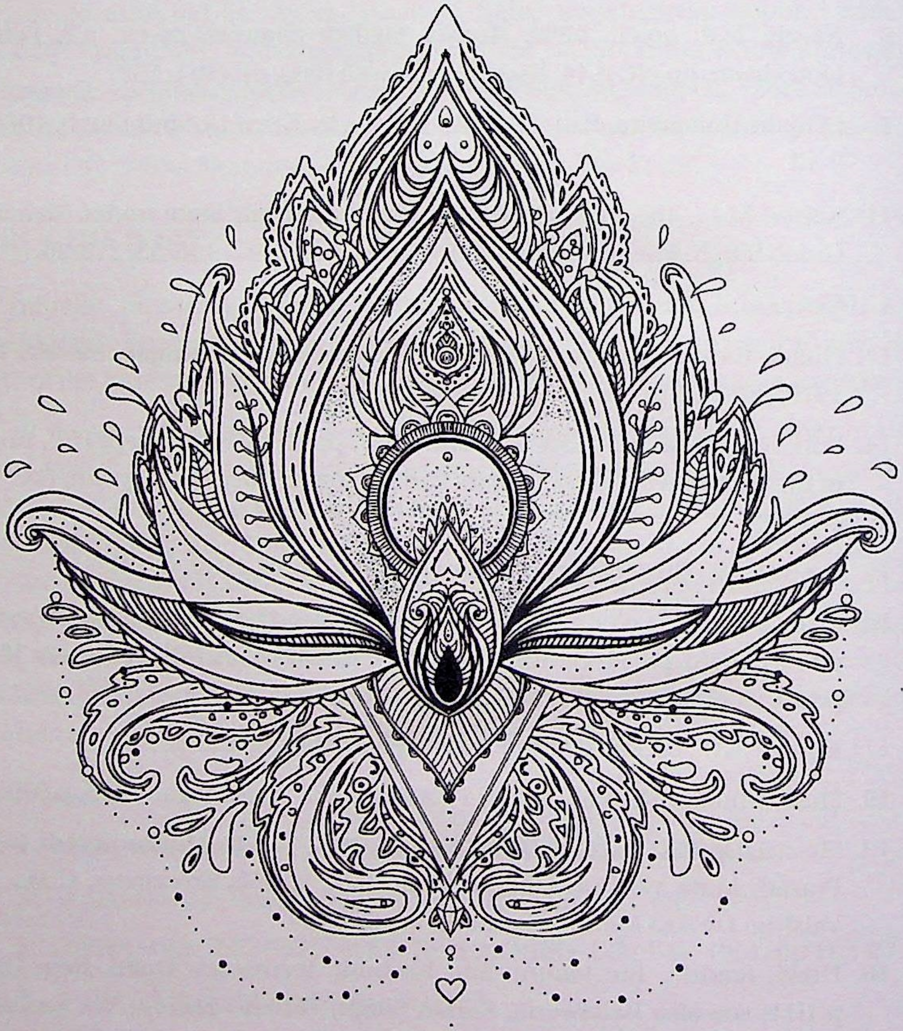

# 4

# Cultural Route to Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine

## AN ARDUOUS UNDERTAKING

It needs to be made very clear here that the pilgrimage to Mata Vaishno Devi in its early stages of time was not an easy affair. There were no roads in any part of the Jammu Region. Only pathways then existed fit for the walking of both human beings and animals. To reach Katra, one had to foot the distance, though women and children could be provided with ponies.

Nevertheless, the pathways were paved with stones at some places, but were not well- marked at others. These also ran through thick forests for a considerable stretch which were infested with looters. There were then numerous streams and some rivers to cross.

The national scene itself was not much different. In the opening years of the 19th century, it is said, the well-known pilgrim centres, like Varanaisi, Hardwar, Trivani, Srirangam and Rameshwaram, had the mass gatherings on the occasion of religious importance, from different parts of the country. But "so uncertain was the prospect of the return of a pilgrim from the south to the north that his death was constructively presumed of and obsequies performed. The risks of being waylaid and done away with or failing victim to sickness and to death were so great. The means of travel was mostly on foot or on bullock carts, when and where available."

In the time of Maharaja Ranbir Singh, electricity was carried to the Mata's Bhawan, and arrangements were made to provide medical aid to the pilgrims.

But it was the development of roads that for the first time transformed the pilgrimage substantially in the time of Maharaja Pratap Singh. In the Panjab a network of roads and railways had already been laid after 1848. Now, Sialkot in the Panjab was linked to Jammu by a road through Suchetgarh. A rail-line also was laid between Sialkot and Jammu in 1890.

A cart road was taken from Jammu to Udhampur in 1902-03, with a tunnel at Nandani. In 1922, it was made fit for wheeled traffic also and extended right upto srinanagar."

Katra too was linked to Jammu first by a cart road, and later by a metalled one fit for other vehicles.

Internally, a number of important towns in the Jammu Region, such as Akhnoor, Riasi, Purmandal, Kathua and Basohli, were brought closer to each other as well as to Jammu city.

No more footing now, nor riding a pony. A pilgrim had only to reach Sialkot, catch a railway train for Jammu, and reach Katra by a lorry. The travel became so easy, cheap and comfortable that it appeared to be a poet's dream. More and more of pilgrims, consequently, were felt drawn to have the holy Darshan of Mata Vaishno Devi. It is within our living memory of our Parents and Grand Parents to have seen about 30,000 pilgrims visiting her Shrine annually just before the country was partitioned.

## CONTEMPORARY PILGRIMAGE

The partition affected the whole country but particularly the Panjab and Bengal provinces. Both were practically scissored into eastern and western parts. West Panjab and Hast Bengal fell to the share of Pakistan.

A large number of the pilgrims to Vaishno Devi used to come from the West Panjab. They were made to leave their homes and hearts to reach India. It took them some years to resettle in various parts of their new homeland. To cap the affairs, the only rail link between Jammu and the rest of India via Suchetgarh was snapped, as Sialkot became a part of Pakistan. For Jammu as well as Kashmir and Ladakh, the land passage to India now lay only through East Panjab. But the road link then existing between Jammu and Pathankot was very frail and treacherous. It passed through the Ujh, Basantar and Ravi, besides numerous streams. Over these, there were no strong and permanent bridges. And the streams were liable to sudden floods. At many places, the road was unfit for wheeled traffic.

Whatever had been earlier achieved in the field of transport and communication between the Panjab and Jammu was lost in just one stroke.

But thanks to Mata Vaishno Devi, with the stablisation of conditions in India gradually, and the construction of a new metalled road between Jammu and Pathankot, with sturdy, bridges wherever required, the old pilgrims from their new homes in all the four corners of the country again embarked upon the pilgrimage to the deity who had made a cosy corner in their hearts. When a rail link between Jammu and Pathankot was laid in 1972 and a commercial air service was introduced, it appeared that the pilgrimage had again gained its former eminence.

The faith of the pilgrims in Vaishno Devi was so deep and their devotion so unalloyed that these could not but impress their neighbours, friends, acquaintances and others profoundly. A desire in these people also was kindled to seek blessings from their beloved Mata. The circle of her devotees, thus, went on ever widening.

Three months were now not enough to satisfy them all, nor only the day pilgrimage. The conditions which had put a bar on its extension no longer existed. The pilgrimage then began to be undertaken during all the 12 months. Still, there were times when the rush of pilgrims forced them to cool their heels for a day or two at Jammu, or Katra, or at the Bhawan, for their turn to enter the holy cave.

The cave leading to the sanctum sanctorum was narrow. Above all, both the entry and the exit had to be regulated through it. And the sanctum sanctorum also could not accommodate more than four to five devotees at a time.

By 1976, the Pilgrim's number reached six lakhs. Their waiting, which now extended further, became unbearable. Something had to be done. But what could this something be? The mouth of the cave, and for that matter the whole of it, was too sacred to be tempered with. One way out was to bore another tunnel through the hill to serve as exit for the pilgrims. But some were opposed to it also. They feared it might damage the cave. Ultimately the decision was left to the Sole Trustee of the Dharmarth, Dr. Karan Singh. After consulting a number of experts, he opted for this bold step. And, amidst the chanting of hymns, on the eve of Vijaydashmi on October 2, 1976, was made the first strike for the tunnel. By the blessings of the Mata, the work was brought to a successful completion within about six months, and the new exit was thrown open to the pilgrims on March 20, 1977, by Dr. Karan Singh.

The tunnel is 38,500 metre long, 1,830 metre wide and 2,215 metre high. If earlier only 2,200 pilgrims could have Vaishno Devi's Darshan in 24 hours, their number now rose to 5,600 and subsequently to 10,000.

From 6 lakhs in 1976, the volume of pilgrims rose to 16 lakhs in 1986. So, another tunnel by the side of the other was bored, and inaugurated on October 20, 1991. With this additional facility, the number of pilgrims crossed the staggering figure of 33 lakhs in 1993. Only Mata Vaishno Devi knows to what pinnacle of popularity would she rise in the years to come:

The boring of the second tunnel was, however, planned and executed under the management of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board.

This Board was constituted in 1986 by an Act of the Jammu and Kashmir Legislature, and replaced the Dharmarth Trust. We shall discuss this change in the last chapter.

Since, its very inception, the Board has been keen to promote the pilgrimage to Mata Vaishno Devi with imaginative measures. It has new and spacious Yatri Niwas at Katra, Adi Kumari, Sanjichat and the Bhawan. Cloakroom facilities have also been provided at these places. Woolen blankets, too are supplied to the pilgrims for the night. A chain of Bhojanalaya have come up on the track, starting from Katra, where wholesome vegetarian food is prepared under hygienic conditions, and served at no-profit-no-loss basis. Snacks, coffee and cold Drinks are made available at a number of Cafeterias-cum-shelter Units on the track from Bal Ganga to the Bhawan. For potable water, taps as well as water-coolers have been set up at short distances.

The track itself has undergone revolutionary changes. Formerly there was only one of it made of stones in the form of stairs. Now, another has been laid by its side, paved with cement tiles. It is smooth, and the pilgrims as well as ponies can tread over it without ups and downs which mark the old one. Its width is not less than 8-10 feet at any point, though it is much wider on the whole.

The Old track has been vastly improved. The stairs have been widened, and fixed with cement slabs in place of stones. Earlier, the portion between 1 and 2 kilometers from the side of the Bhawan was so narrow; hardly 2.5 feet at certain points, that one covered it with a bated breath. Now, a 6-8 feet pathway has replaced it.

The same portion is also prone to intermittent rains. Over it has been raised a line of sheds of metallic sheets, which not only provide shelter from rain, but also serve as resting places.

Both the old and the new tracks are adequately lit at night by powerful vapour lamps. For the pilgrims' safety, parapet walls or railings have been fixed all along the tracks on their open sides.

The tracks have also been made beautiful by laying small parks with flower beds at a number of points, which also open up a panoramic view of the scenic surroundings.

Special care is taken to keep these clean. After about every furlong of distance, a sweeper is posted for this job. Public utilities, with a capacity of about 700-800 seats with an automatic flushing system have been established over the tracks at the Bhawan.

While the ascent by the old track can be made on foot only, that by the new one might be made on ponies or Dandies also by old and invalid devotees. Pithus or coolies might be hired for the carriage of children as well as for the baggage. The rates of all these modes of carriage are fixed. The Board has introduced 'PawanHans' helicopter services uptil Sanji Chatt. Yet another route from Andh Kumari till Bhawan has further shortened the distance. It has facilitated the provision of availability of autos enroute to Maa's Bhawan; much to the ire of local ponywallas and business men.

For the sick pilgrims, medical aid centres run at Katra, Bal Ganga and Sanjichhat. Primary Health Centres have been established. These work round the clock. Telephone facilities are available at Adh Kumari and the Bhawan besides, of Course, at Katra.

The offerings of Bhaints. which every devotee makes to the Mata, are available in the open market, but as can also be purchased at fixed rates from shop run by Shrine Board at the Bhawan. The board also has a shop there for the sale of Souvenirs in the form of Sarees, Dupatas, Bangles, wall-clocks, etc, received as offerings at the Mata's Darbar.

The Board exercises full control over the offerings made in cash or kind. The devotee might use for this purpose the donation boxes locked and fixed at various points on the tracks, or make the donation against receipt at the specified counters of the Board at Katra, Adh Kumari, Sanjichhat and the Bhawan.

All said and done, the contemporary pilgrimage to Mata Vaishno Devi has come to be an exhilarating and soul-stirrings experience. Whatever are the myths and legends about her, she has in the modern times become practically a living Supreme Reality, blessing those who propitiate her, and granting the wishes of those who venerate her. Her "Jai" charms the ears of millions. Their faith in her is unflinching, they believe she would definitely come to their rescue. Hence, many of them are ever eager to make a pilgrimage to her Shrine year after year; many visit it more than once every year. Their spirit is depicted when the pilgrimage is undertaken bare footed; some crawl over it on their bellies; other roll on to the astonishment of all, but with splendid reverence in their own hearts. It is indeed victory to Mata Vaishno Devi- "Jai Mata Di".

We have noted in an earlier chapter that the pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi, though a matter of great spiritual thrill, was yet an arduous affair in the beginning. The pilgrims coming from outside the State had to face jaded weariness and a long, overstrained journey on foot. The conditions had, therefore, made it obligatory for them to take rest for some time after traversing a certain distance, a number of places had, accordingly come to acquire the reputation of being permanent halting places on account of certain facilities. An hour or so spent there, cheered them up, and filled their hearts with fresh enthusiasm for the onward journey.

Strangely, however, someone at sometime has associated these halting places with the various incidents of the legendry flight of Mata Vaishno Devi and the pursuit of Bhario. Today, owing to this occurrence, her devotee visually as well as physically feel, in the course of their journey, that they were also treading upon the same track which had once followed by the Mata. When overcome by this feeling, their joy knows no bounds.

## JAMMU

This city has been the most popular halting place for the pilgrims. Many of them must spend here sometime, especially on their return journey to make some purchase, if or nothing else, visit a number of reputed temples for which Jammu is known as the city of temples.

Earlier, the pilgrims used to stay here for a night or so with their local relatives or mere acquaintances, and then moved on. Today, numerous hotels, sarais, a Government Tourist Bungallow and a Motel look forward to serve them.

But a large majority of them prefer to leave for Katra soon after their arrival here. There is a regular bus service for Katra from the City Railway Station as well as the General Bus Stand. Taxis are also available. Now a days, a direct train upto Katra has further made the journey comfortable and convenient.

## KOUL KANDOLI

Those who marched on foot from Jammu in the olden days, reached this place for their first halt. It lies about 9 kilometer north-west of Jammu, near a small town of Nagrota. An old temple of Koul Kandoli gives place it's name, according to a legend, during the enchanting days of her youth, the Devi used to play here in the company of her friends. Once, they felt highly thirsty. The Devi handed them over bowl (locally called koul) and asked them to rub it (Kandoli) over a dry piece of land. Her playmates did so, and immediately there gushed out water from that point. That is why the place came to be known as Koul-Kandoli.

The river Tawi flows not far from this place, and as in the past, so also now, not only drinking water but assorted eatable ,items also are available here. Earlier, there were arrangements for the pilgrims' stay also.

There is yet another legend connected with Kaul Kandoli. It says that here lived a lady who owned a farm of Kandoli or lady-fingers. This vegetable, she used to cook and serve in a bowl or Kaul to the pilgrims free of charge. In due course of time, her service earned the place the name of Kaul Kandoli.

Some suggest that this was the site where then Mata held her grand feast and came in conflict with Bhairon. Possibly Kaul Kandoli was a Sati and a temple was built in her honour.

## DEVE MAI

The pilgrims walking on foot next halted here. It was named after a local lady whose temple stands in its vicinity. Because of the availability of sundry goods needed by the pilgrims, they used to spend some time here.

While, however, Devi Mai does not fall on the present bus route, the bus does not normally stop at Kol Kandoli too.

## KATRA

It forms the base camp for the further ascent on foot to the holy Shrine. Pithus are available for carrying baggage, and ponies and Dandies (or coolies) for old, infirm and all those who wish to use them.

About 48 kilometers from Jammu, it is located amidst picturesque surroundings at a height of about 2,500 feet. As already said, in earlier times a custom had evolved for the pilgrim to enjoy the hospitality of the local people for a day or two as, of course, their paying guests. Provided with all the homely comforts, they felt fully at ease at their mud-houses, and the inconvenience of their wearisome journey was soon consigned to oblivion.

But now Katra has all the modern facilities which are continuously expanding. There are, thus, the Yatri Niwas and the Vishramghar run by the Shrine Board, Dhamahalas, J&K Government Tourist Bungallow and private hotels for stay, hospital and dispensaries for medical aid, and a big market for every kind of merchandise.

We have recounted in an earlier chapter the legend of the grand feast arranged by Sridhar at Hansali, the seed of strife between Vaishno Devi and Bhairon, the flight of the former and the pursuit by the latter, and the final end of Bhairon at her hands. On her flight, Mata Vaishno had halted at a number of places, and from Katra onwards, the places of rest for the pilgrims have come to be identified with her stay.

## DARSHANI DARWAZA

About 1 kilometer away from Katra, at a height of about 2,700 feet above the sea level, lies a gateway. It is called as such because Vaishno Devi passed this way on her upward journey after she had turned her back upon the site of the feat. According to some, however, the point marks the place where the Mata had first appeared before or gave her Darshan to Sridhar. The gateway at this site was built later by someone to commemorate the event.

## BAL GANGA

This is the place where Vasino Devi is said to have made her first halt. She was accompanied by a Langoor. The latter felt thirsty, but there was nowhere any water to drink.

The place was wholly stony. Vaishno Devi is said to have pierced it with an arrow. Through the opening thus caused, gushed forth sweet and cold water which began to flow in the form of a stream. The Lagoor then quenched his thirst.

The Mata also is said to have availed to this occasion to wash her hair in the stream which, accordingly, came to be called Bal Ganga.

However, as Vaishno Devi had caused a stream by striking an arrow or 'ban,' it is also known as a Ban Ganga.

The stream, about 1 kilometer away from Darshani Darwaza, is now linked direct to Katra by a metalled road. It is crossed by an old wooden bridge. Earlier, it was customary for every pilgrim to take a purificatory bath in its cool and refreshing waters. A portion on it's right bank was set apart for ladies.

Just across the bridge, there is an old temple which in fact marks the starting point of the ascent to the majestic heights of the Trikuta Hills. From here lead upward the two tracks, the old with stairs, and the new smooth one, built by the State Government.

## CHARAN PADUKA

The track, dotted with a number of beautiful temples next bring us to the halting place of Charan Paduka. According to the Legend, Vasino Devi had looked back from this point to see if Bhairon was following her or not. Her standing is said to have left here permanent foot- prints-'Charans' over which stands a temple. Hence, the name of the place.

About 4½ kilometer from Bal Ganga, at a height of about 3,380 feet, it was formerly one of the major halting places enroute to the holy shrine. Fried Chanas and the pickle of Anwaja along with cold drinking water were the specialties of this place, which were freely distributed among the pilgrims throughout the day. Now, modern tea-stalls and snacks-bars dominate the scene here.

## ADI KUMARI

About 4½ kilometers ahead and around 500 meters from Inderprasth is the main resting place of Adi Kumari, also called Adh Kumair, at a small plateau. The ascent from Charan Paduka to this point is a difficult one, and it is for the first time in its course that most of the pilgrims, young and old, really feel the necessity of taking rest for some time. At a height of about 4,800 feet, here is available today, as it was in the past, ever kind of facility to refresh them- cold and hot drinks, a variety of eatables, including fruits, and rest-cum-view points. The scenic view from here of the surroundings, especially of the valley below at night, when the eye meets the twinkling lights of Katra and other small neighboring towns, defies any description.

A multi-storeyed sarai, Paratap Bhawan, with sanitary fittings, and accommodating about 500 pilgrims, was built here in 1973 by the Dharmarth Trust. The shrine Board has developed it further, and provides woolen blankets to those who wish to spend the night. It also provides in its Bhojnalaya whole-some food at cheap rates. Other facilities, such as health and banking are also available here.

As the legend goes, when the Mata arrived here, her eyes fell on a mendicant who was occupied in penance. She told him to keep her presence a secret from anyone till she stayed there. Nearby was a small and narrow cave, about 15 feet long. She made it her abode, and went into mediation.

In the meantime, Baheron, who had been following her, reached that place, after chasing about for nine months. He asked the mendicant if he had seen any young girl coming to this side, sensing the intentions of the new visitor, he told him that the girl under reference was no ordinary person she was a Mahasakti, a great goddess, who had taken a vow of celebacy from the day of dawn in this world, and was called Adi Kumari (now corrupted as Adh Kanwari). His counsel to Bhairon was, therefore, to give up her thought. But no word of wisdom carried any weight with the latter. He searched for her, and entered the small cave. Since the cave was closed on the other end, the Mata blasted it with her trident, and escaped like a wind.

As Vaishno Devi had spent about nine months in this cave like an infant in the womb of his mother, it came to be known as Garbha-Joon. Formerly, it was usual with most of the pilgrims to have a go through it as a pious act, and also to offer prayers at a nearby Devi's temple. But now only a small percentage of them do it, and even they get their turn after hours' of waiting, owing to the unprecedented expansion of the pilgrimage.

Earlier, there existed a water tank on the left side of the Devi temple. It had been built by the Dharmarth Trust. Later, when modern water-supply was available, the presence of the tank became not only redundant but also a up, and a beautiful park, with a fountain, was laid over it.

The Devi temple also demands a further notice here. Inside it are two images of the goddess engraved on a block stone-slab with silver-inlaid eyes. One of them represents Kali, while the other is said to be of Devi. An image of Hanuman also stands a little away from the entrance door of the temple.

The stone-slab seems to have been made in imitation of the ancient practice of carving out Saptmatrikas on one Stone-slab. Later on, some of these seven Matas began to be represented independently, and the representation of two goddesses on one slab seems to be an intermediary stage. Accordingly, this temple seems to be an old, though the image of Hanuman appears to be a later addition to the complex.

The practice of passing through the Garbha Joon also is reminiscent of olden times. The non-Aryans are known to have been worshipping the Linga of the father-god and the Yoni of the mother goddess, as is shown by the finds at the Indus valley site. Later, as a consequence of the syntheses of the two cultures, the Aryans also began to do so. Under the non-Aryan influence, the ancient Aryan devotees of the mother-goddess also came to perform a ritual known as the Hiranansarbha-Mahadana. According to it, a pious prince, desiring to earn religious merit, made a Hiranya-Garbha or golden-womb. It was a big pot made of gold, about three cubics in height. The prince entered this pot, while the priests performed the ceremonies of Garbhadana. etc., as was done in the case of an ordinary pregnant woman. He was subsequently taken out of the golden womb as if he were a newly born child, and declared, "O the best of gods, previously I was given birth to by my mother, and had only the qualities of an earthly creature; but now owing to my rebirth from your womb, I have a celestial body".

The passage of the pilgrims to Vaishno Devi through the Garbha-Joon at Adi Kumari also signify for them a new birth, leaving behind the earthly, sinful one. Evidently, as per one view, the ritual is akin to the non-Aryan practice described above, and goes to confirm that the struggle between Vaishno Devi and Bhairon actually represents the one between the Aryans and the non-Aryans and a compromise between them and their cultures at the end.

## HATHI MATHA

This is the terminology used to describe the climb ahead of Adi Kumari. It is practically as steep as the forehead of tusker, and in the course of its scent touches the height of 6,500 feet. The distance from the last halt to this point is about 2.5 kilometers. It is better to cover it by the new, smooth track than by the old one with stairs. Cold and hot drinks, together with snacks, are available at the top.

Next, the pilgrims had to cross the KAMAN GOSHA which again is similar to the bow-like path. It was so narrow that two persons could not walk abreast on it. Fortunately, however, the whole of this portion of the track as well as a part of the Hathi Matha have been stamped out of the pilgrims' path.

## SANJI CHHAT

It is now the highest point which the pilgrims have to pass over in their entire journey from Bal Ganga to the Mata's Darbar. Located at a height of 7,200 feet, and roughly 2 kilometers from Adi Kumari, it presents a paranomic view of the lands below. Formerly, there used to be only one ordinary tea-shop here. Now, modern cafeterias have replaced it. Karan Bhawan, a modern Sarai for 200 pilgrims, and a pony shed were also built here by the Dharmarth Trust in March 1977. Now, the Shrine Board looks after the sarai and provides blankets to those who need them at night.

## BHAIRON TEMPLE

Although it forms the next halting places on the old track, yet it has to be visited only after the Mata's Darshan. It is, therefore, advisible to follow the new track from the Hathi Matha, which goes straight to the Bhawan. Thereby, one is spared of about 2 kilometers of further climb also.

To continue our old legend, it is said that after emerging from the Garbha-Joon, Vaishno Devi headed straight to the site of the holy Shrine via Hathi Matha and Sanjichhat. Bhairon did not lag much behind. He was repeatedly asked by the Mata to desist from his dangerous course, but to no avail. Finally, she reached her cave, entered it, and posted the languor to guard its mouth.

Bhairon also soon arrived there, and put the Langoor to rout in a contest. Then began a face to face combat between him and the Mata. The latter took the form of Chandi with fierce looks, and cut off Bhairon's head which was flung up in the hills. His torso was left at the mouth of the cave to be turned into a large boulder. Bhairon begged forgiveness before he breathed his last, and the gracious goddess promised his worship but only after that of hers. Accordingly, there was built a temple for him, about 2.5 kilometers away from the holy cave, at the site where his head had fallen.

## MATA'S DARBAR OR BHAWAN

Nestled in the bosom of the Trikuta Hills, at a height of about 5,200 feet above the sea level, lies the Mata's Bhawan or Darbar. Its total distance from Bal Ganga by the new track is about 13 kilometers. While it is all climbing by the new track, the journey thereafter upto the Bhawan is descending.

The Mata's Shrine is a natural cave. On a raised portion of the rock- platform, inside it, are three small Pindis or stone-outcroppings said to represent Mahasarasvati, Mahalaxmi and Mahakali. All the three are further said to represent Mata Vaishno Devi, while according to some only the central Pindi of Mahalaxmi does that. All the three, however, rise from a common base, abut 5 feet below. They have been inlaid in silver sheet, and are adorned with silver Muktas or headgears, golden canopies or Chhatars and a variety of golden ornaments.

The Pindi of Sarasvati is of off-white colour, that of Mahalaxmi light red, and light black is the colour of the Pindi of Mahakali.

The cave is about 100 feet long, and a stream of knee-deep, crystal clear, cold water- the Charan Ganga, flows from under the Pindis. Its mouth is so narrow that only one pilgrim can enter it at a time and that too by crawling over the boulder lying there. Inside also it does not allow anyone to walk erect or without brushing the sides, as its rock-walls on both the sides are slopping and leave in between space enough for the pilgrims to move only in a line or queue.

Besides the sanctum sanctorum, there are some other rock-formations inside the cave which are also worshipped as holy symbols. There are, thus, a number of small Pindis at a little height on the left. While five of these are said to represent the Pandavas, seven belong to the Sapt-Rishis.

A little far away, just over one's head, a portion of the rock resembles a big claw as well as face of the lion, while at another portion appears small snakes, besides a large multi-faced Sheshnag. There are then some other formations, too. At the very start, we come across those of Langoor or Hanuman and lord Ganesha. Further away are those of Surya, Chandrama and Kapila cow. Practically at the end of the cave, on its left side, is a small pillar, the establishment of which is attributed to Prahalad in the dim past. On the left side of the Sanctum Sanctorum, a portion of the rock-wall bears the looks of Ganesh. Almost in front of the central Pindi there and at the other end of the platform is another Pindi which looks like Siva's Linga.

If the identification of all these formations is accepted, the cave shrine indeed presents picture of great catholicity, an amalgam of all the three main sects of Hinduism, i.e., Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism.

Besides these natural rock formations inside the cave, some modern images are also found accommodated on the holy platform. Thus, all the three main Pindis have behind them their icons. Of Mahasarasvati, there are two-one made of white marble, in a sitting posture, with four hands, and the other cast in brass. Mahalaxmi's image is made of 65 Tolas of gold. It is commonly believed to have been donated by Maharaja Gulab Singh, but was actually done by Maharaja Pratap Singh. By the side of these is another golden image of Mata Vaishno Devi, riding a lion, which was donated by Dr. Karan Singh in 1977. It weighs 22 Tolas. Of Mahakali also there are two modern images- one made of an alloy of eight metals, Ashtadhatu. and practically black in colour, and the other of white marble.

The face of the cave was earlier made of the natural rock. But it has now been covered by marble, and given the shape of a modern gateway. The open space in front of it as well as the stairs leading to it also has been paved with marble. And the whole of this marble work has been got executed by a devotee of the Mata.

It is to be we noted that a Yatri slip issued by the Shrine Board authorities at Katra. A token is issued at the Yatri counter at the Bhawan against this slip, which indicates a pilgrims turn for the Mata's Darshan.

Before the Darshan, however, the pilgrims take purificatory bath with the sacred waters of the Charan Ganga which flows out of the cave into the bathing ghats outside the Shrine. Separate arrangements exist for men and women for this purpose.

Putting on clean clothes, the pilgrims next stand in a queue for their turn to have the Mata's Darshan.

The old cave is now thrown open to the pilgrims only when there is practically no rush, and the exit is made through one of the two newly built tunnels. In case of rush, one of the tunnels is used for entry, the other for exit.

As already said, one has to crawl to enter the narrow opening of the old cave, and wade through knee-deep cold water to reach the sanctum sanctorum. The passage through the tunnels is straight.

Because of the narrowness of the sanctum sanctorum, not more than four or five devotees, in addition to two or three priests, can be accommodated at a time inside it.

The pilgrims make their offerings to the Mata and the priests conduct the ritual of worship for them, put a mark of red colour on their foreheads, and hand them over Prasad, a few coins called 'Mata Da Khazana' a band of red cloth to be tied round their head, and a round of red thread to be worn round their neck. With the Chanting of 'Jai Mata Di', then they come out.

After the Mata's Darshan, the pilgrims do Kanjak Pujan i.e., they feed some small girls with Halwa-Puri and also hand out some cash or other articles of common use as Dakshana. With this ritual, their pilgrimage practically comes to successful completion, and they might prepare to return with a sense of having gathered a feather in their cap, forgetting the agony and wearisome they had undergone through their arduous journey.

Some are, however, little bit depressed for the short time they are allowed to stand face to face before the Mata inside her cave. The number of pilgrims waiting for her Darshan does not permit more of time. Waiting itself is a tedious process. So that it does not degenerate into monotony, the pilgrims engross themselves in singing Mata's devotional songs called 'Bhetan'. The Shrine Board also screens religious movies and serials on the internal TV network.

Gone are the days when the volume of the pilgrimage was small, and the devotees could stay inside the cave for as long as they wished. But then they also had to enter and come out through one dark cave with torches in their hands, witness everything in the cave in the light of oil lamps, favour the priests with presents for the concession, prepare their food themselves or take it from Dhabas where it was prepared under unhygienic conditions, sleep in the open or inside the big halls with insufficient blankets, piss in the open, distribute a big chunck of money among the beggars on the way, and do similar other unpalatable things.

All these are now things of the past. The Shrine Board provides suitable accommodation in its halls and rooms to the maximum possible extent, and wholesome food its Bhojnalaya at no-profit-no-loss basis. The entry to the holy cave is regulated through a system. Not only the cave but the whole Bhawan of the Mata shimmers and glitters with electric light. Instead of one, now there are multiple caves. Beggars have disappeared. Sanitation is accorded a top priority. Vacuum cleaners, fogging machines and an automatic dry-cleaning plant for the supply of clean blankets to the pilgrims have been installed. Public utilities with automatic flushing systems have been established at the Bhawan besides other places. Also now provided there is the facility, of the bank, so that no longer it is an isolated place as it used to be only a few years ago.

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# Rituals of Worship

We know that the people of India have been iconolatrous since very early times. The Vedic times in our history are particularly marked for the evolution of a process of rituals meant not only to gratify various gods and goddesses for securing boons, but also for maintaining the world order. The origin of the Brahmana texts, with rituals as their theme, and of the Kalpa Sutras later, written in short sentences to ensure easy memorization, was the natural outcome.

With the march of times, however, the mode of worship underwent a change, and so also did the rituals. While earlier it was believed that the gods could be propitiated by collective rituals, from the Puranic period onwards, individual worship in the form of Puja became more popular. The austere metaphysics of the earlier age now gave place to personal emotional relationship between the god or goddess and his or her devotee. And, with a view to satisfy their new urge, construction of temples and installation of images became a common feature, and so did ceremonial worship at these places. Pilgrimage to the places, which came to be considered sacred, was just a corollary of the new development.

The temples were built according to certain principles. One of these was that these should, as far as possible, face eastward. The shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi is not man-made; it is a natural one, and yet it also faces east-ward."

The most important part of attempt is its inner sanctum which houses the deities. In the sacred literature, this kind of place is called the Garbhagirha or the womb. It is here that the most sacred rites are performed.

The Garbhagriha and its immediate surroundings inside the cave hold the three Pindis of Mahasarasvati, Mahalaxmi and Mahakali.

It may be mentioned here, even at the cost of repletion, that Puja is basically of the nature of an individual worship or personal emotional relationship between him and his deity who is immortal and yet having been born. What he does or needs, he believes his deity also does and needs. Therefore, many of his rituals convey his reverence towards his deity as the most honoured guest. In simple words, his rituals concretize the more abstract aspects of the supernatural so that ordinary devotees, who have no time for lengthy meditation, can relate themselves directly of their deities.

## GENERAL RITUALS OF SAKTI WORSHIP

The Sakta puranas place no bar on either the woman or the low-caste people to worship any goddess. All of them are, however, enjoined upon preferably to follow the Daksina Maraa of worship. Which means the vegetarian one, though, some cases involving the offering of one's own blood are mentioned in these texts. Human sacrifice is totally condemned, while the offering of animals could be made by the non-Brahaman devotees.

The various goddesses could be worshipped in the form of a Pratima or the image, Mandala. Yantra. Linga. Ghata (Pot), Pustaka, Paduka. sword, etc. the worship is, however, preferred in the evening. After it is done, lamps full of ghee might be offered. The days of Mahanamvi or Mahastami, Puranamasi. the Astamis of every month, the Navaratras, every Tuesday, and the night of Diwali are especially auspicious for the Sakti worship.

The rituals of Sakti worship as explained in the Puranas are different from the Tantric ones. These are neither complicated nor mystical, nor mysterious, and consist of 16 steps or items called Uppacaras—(l) Asna (seating of the image), (2) Savagata (welcoming the Devi); (3) Padva (water for washing the feet), (4) Arghva (offering which may be general or special); (5) Acamana (water for sipping); (6) Madhuparka (Honey, ghee, milk, and curd); (7) Snana (water for bathing); (8) Vasana (clothes or garments); (9) Abharna (jewels); (10) Gandha (perfume); (11) Puspa (flowers); (12) Dhupa (incense); (13) Dipa (light); (14) Navivedya (food); (15) Vandana (prayer); and (16) Dakshina.

Namajapa or recitation of various means of the Sakti or Devi is also carried out. The Puranas further associate with every occasion of worship sacramental meals. The brahamanas and the Kumaris or maidans are to be served first of all, and the others are to be followed then.

Homa ceremony is another important feature. It consists of pouring out of ghee, milk, grains, rice, seasons and Kusa into the fire amidst the chanting of hymns. Certain days are, however, more auspicious than others for this ceremony.

But all these rituals would be of no avail if not observed with due devotion and sincerity. Devi is the mother of all and complete surrender to her is deemed necessary. A variety of fasts or Vratas are also recommended, mostly for women, with a view to propitiating the Devi.

## PRIESTLY RITUALS AT MATA'S SHRINE

The Dharmarth Trust of Jammu, which will form a subject of our further study subsequently, got compiled its own rules and regulations called Ain-i-Dharmarth in 1884 A.D. Based on the Puranas, the Ain also lays down the mode of worship and the rituals to be performed at the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devio.

Accordingly, the goddess is worshipped here by the priest thrice a day, i.e., in the morning, at noon and in the evening. When this is being done, none other than the priests actually conducting the worship can be present inside the cave. They come for the purpose after taking a purificatory bath and putting on clean clothes with Dhotis. However, it is customary for them to sanctify their bodies once again by sprinkling the waters of Ganga over them.

To start with, they offer prayers to Lord Ganesha and some other deities. Then they bathe the three Pindis with a mixture of milk, Kewra, curd, sugar, honey and ghee, and wash the whole cave with the waters of the Charan Ganga.

Next, the Pindis are cleansed with a piece of wet cloth, their base is covered with fresh flowers petals, and they are attired in silken clothes of the finest quality, adorned with golden Ornaments, Mukats, Chhattars and some other paraphernalia, and finally flowers are showered and scent is sprinkled over them.

The same treatment is given to the idols placed alongside the Pindis. Kajal is applied to their eyes, Sindhur to their bodies, and bangles are worn round their arms.

A priest then takes his seat near the Pindis on the platform to perform the subsequent rituals, while the others present in the cave help him. He prepares Charnamrit from the water with which the Pandis have been bathed, and collects Naivedva consisting of Halwa sweets.

I'resli fruits and dry fruits, and also small coins are distributed among the devotees who call these 'Mata Ka Khazana'. All these items are put into different pots.

Next, Dhupa or incense is burnt, Dipas or lamps full of Desi Ghee are lighted, and prayers to the deities, along with the waving of the lighted lamps, are offered; and music played with the help of a variety of instruments, such as drums, bells and conches. This whole procedure is known by the term of Arti. At the end of it, the priests praise the Mata in a loud voice- 'Jaikara Bhawanwali Da-Bol Sanche Darbar Ki Jai.'

While the Arti goes on inside the cave, a religious lecture, punctuated with devotional songs, is delivered outside by a religious preacher, near the Atka counter. The marbled courtyard opposite the mouth of the cave can accommodate a maximum of about 100 devotees. Those who are present at this hour, enjoy the privilege of listening to this lecture. They have the further fortune of having the Darshan of the sacred lighted lamps which are brought out of the cave in a tray by a priest. However, he first offers prayers, by waving the said lamps, to the mouth of the cave, Lord Ganesa's formation on it, and the Akhand Jayoti which emits flames all the 24 hours. Another Akhand Jayoti burns in the sanctum sanstorum. Next, the lamps are passed on to the sitting devotees who put their hands over the sacred flames, and, with their hands thus purified, touch their faces. Last of all, they receive Charnamrit and Naivedya which includes Halwa and dry fruit.

In all, the Arti at one time takes up about two hours, and only a descendant of Sridhar has the privilege to perform it.

The deities are fed also thrice a day - first after the morning Arti, second time at 12 noon, and lastly after the evening Arti. A number of vegetables and chapati all the three times, sweet dish of kheer at noon, and rice only in the morning and at noon form her menu.

## RITUALS PERFORMED BY DEVOTEES

Except when the priests are occupied with their rituals, the Shrine is open to the devotees day and night. The latter first of all take a purificatory bath with the waters of Charang Ganga, put on clean clothes without shoes, and then enter the cave when their turn comes, of course. There is a large bell hanging outside the cave. They strike it.

The most common offering made by the devotees to the Mata is a Bhaint. It is a packet normally containing a coconut, Mauli or red string, Sindhur or a red powder, Dhupa or incense, Ilaichi, Supari, Loung, bangles, kishmish, grams, and a red coloured flag, all covered in a red coloured scarf or band. The predominance of the red colour in this offering signifies life full of vigour and vitality, and is considered auspicious otherwise also.

Formerly, it was carried by the devotees right upto the sanctum sanctorum, and a part of it was returned to them by the priests then and there. But now mainly owing to security reasons and partly also because of the rush of the pilgrims which dictates every measure to save time, the Bhaints have to be offered before an image outside the cave, and are received back at the end of the exit tunnel. Because of the rising cost of some of the articles, the Bhaints do not contain all the specified items these days.

By Bhaint is literally meant what is offered, and the offering is one of the major cornerstones of Hinduism. There is a wide belief among the Hindus that a devotee's wishes are fulfilled if he propitiates the deities by an offering. But what should be offered? The tribal people used to offer animal as well as human sacrifices. When some of their deities were absorbed into the Hindu pantheon, these sacrifices also were owned. In certain areas of India, the animal sacrifices are still in vogue, especially in the cases of Kali, Camunda, Candi and Durga.

In the Jammu Region itself, animal sacrifices were offered to Kali till recent times. The temple of Sukrala Devi, about 10 kilometers from Ballawar, has an image of this goddess. On every Tuesday and Sunday, goats were offered to her in sacrifice.

Such was the practice in the temple of Kali in the Bahu Fort of Jammu as well. But under the Punjabi influence it was given up. It is said, "the Punjabis generally do not kill, they either offer Karah - a sort of pudding- or purchase, he-goats from the Purbias, and after dedicating them to the goddess, set them free. The animals are of course reclaimed by the owners. The same animal, thus can be offered several times. But it appears that this does not matter".

By and large, the animal sacrifice has now been substituted by the offerings of certain fruits and vegetables, like coconuts, pumpkins, cucumbers and gourds.

We do not know if animal sacrifice were ever made at the shrine formerly dedicated to Trikuta Devi and then to Mata Vaishno Devi, as we believe. The Mata herself is known for her strict vegetarianism, so have been her priests and the bulk of her devotees. Preparation or taking of non-vegetarian dishes are banned on the Trikuta Hills since long. But it is within one's living memory to have seen some of the Mata's devotees getting themselves photographed at Jammu with their heads placed on their right hands (through a photographic trick) and offering these to her. This act perhaps only symbolized their deep devotion to the Mata and nothing more. Therefore, we have every reason to hold fast to our view that, what to talk of human sacrifices, even animal sacrifices were never made here. Coconut or the Narial has been, as said above, the most important constituent of the offerings to Mata Vaishno Devi.

There is a popular story which traces the origin of the substitution of this offering to goddess Jawalamukhi. According to it, there lived in the medieval times a devotee of hers named Dhianu Bhagat. Once, while passing through Delhi on a pilgrimage to Jawala Mai, in the company of about thousand others, he was brought before Akbar, the Mughal Emperor, provoked by the Devi's praises, the Emperor killed Dhianu's horse, and wanted to see if his Devi could revive it.

Leaving his dead horse at Delhi, he hastened to seek the Devi's blessings, but to no avail even after days of devotional worship. Then he cut off his own head, and offered it to propitiate the Devi. Impressed by Dhianu's supreme sacrifice, soon the Devi put in her appearance before him, and not only was he restored to life, but the horse also at Delhi. Amazed indeed was the Emperor. With a view to testing further the power of the Devi. It is said he tried every means to put off the sacred flames at Jawala Mukhi, but came a cropper. Then he submitted and offered a golden umbrella or Chhatar to the Devi.

At Jawala Mukhi, the goddess asked Dhianu Bhagat to seek a boon. He begged her not to put her devotees to so severe a test as to make them offer their heads. The Devi graciously agreed to accept the offerings of Narial if it was made sincerely in place of any animal or human sacrifice. Thus, is said to have originated the new practice.

There is, however, no reference to this story or an part of it connected with Akbar in any reliable book of history.

Coming back to the subject of offerings made to Mata Vaishno Devi, it is a common practice with the devotees to place at her feet such articles as red dupatas with silver or golden linings, golden or silver Chhatara, a variety of ornaments of gold and silver, paintings, flags emblems of royality, cash in accordance with one's capacity or wish or vow (Sukhna), etc, in addition to the customary Bhaints.

The devotees stand before the Pindis with folded hands and, after making the offerings, prostrate before them, and rub their foreheads at the threshold of the Sanctum Sanctorum. The priest apply vermillion to their foreheads, bless them on behalf of the deities, put Charnamrit in their right hands for drinking, return a portion of their offerings, and hand out a few coins called "Mata Ka Khazana" as well as Naivedya or Prasad.

Having possessed these items and casting a final glance on the divine Pindis, the devotees pray for peace and prosperity, and finally make room for others, leaving the cave in ecstasy.

It is customary to carry a portion of the Prasad to their Native places for distribution among their relatives, friends and Neighbours. The "Khazana" the devotees keep with themselves amidst their riches which are believed to expand as a result.

At the Bhawan, after the Mata's Darshan, the devotees perform the Kanya Puian. i.e., the worship of the maidens who are considered as the representation of the goddess. Some of them, however do it at their homes on return.

According to the Devi Bhagavata, the maidens to be worshipped should be of the age between 2 and 10 years. While a girl of one year or below is unable to appreciate the taste of food, the one of the above 10 is not worthy of worship for this purpose. The total number of girls to be worshipped should be preferably in accordance with the number of the Tithi on the day of worship, and never more than nine. All of them should be healthy, graceful, without any kind of deformity, and legally born. The Kanya Puian is said to confer on the devotees the boons of health, wealth and victory against their enemies.

We have already mentioned that earlier when the pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi lasted only for about three winter months, it used to commence with the onset of the Navaratras.

The Navaratras are a special occasion for the Hindus, and are celebrated throughout India in one form or the other. According to the Bhavishya Purana. all the scarifies laid down in the Vedas and Sastras are not equal even to one hundredth part of the Navaratra Puja. Little wonder, the heaviest rush of the pilgrims to Vaishno Devi even now occurs during the auspicious days of the Navataras of Asven or Asuj (October). At the Mata's Bhawan also then a grand Bhandara is arranged on all the nine days, and Shatchandi Mahayagya is held, on which occasion learned scholars from many parts of the country are invited to deliver their discourses. These activities are repeated during the Navaratras of Chaitra also (April).

The Navaratra Puja is infact performed in honour of Durga, and twice a year for the first nine days of the bright half in the months of Chaitra and Asvin as said above. As a legend goes, lord Rama invoked Durga before he fell upon his formidable foe, Ravana, who had abducted his wife, Sita. He did so during the Navaratras of Asvin. Pleased with him, the goddess granted him so much power that he easily got the better of his rival.

It is further said that Lord Ram was the first person to have worshipped the goddess in the month of Asvin.

The great Sage Vyasa explains in detail how the Navaratras should be celebrated. The construction of a special shed where the goddess is to be consecrated, continuous recitation of hymns by Brahaman priests for nine days, and Kanya Pujan form the main features of this ceremony.

In the Jammu Region also, the Navaratras are celebrated by offering prayers to Durga, keeping feast and Kanya Pujan. But there is a special ceremony also. On the commencement of this festival, barley seeds are planted in sand placed in an earthen pot at home amid the chanting of hymns in praise of Durga. When it is Ashtami or Naumi. Kanya Pujan is performed, and the pot, containing the barley plants called Kheti or Khetri is immersed in a river.

Tuesday of every week is also considered highly auspicious for the worship of Durga and Mata Vaishno Devi. According to a legend, Siva himself suggested this day to propitiate Sakti.

Jagarna is yet another important ritual performed by the Mata's devotees. It consists of awakening for a good part of the night or the whole of it, and spending it in singing devotional songs in praises of the goddess (Bhetan).

Formerly, it was mostly held at Katra as well as at the Mata's Bhawan only. But now it is held wherever the Mata's Devotees gather together. It has become more elaborate also.

The devotees set up a sort of small temple of the Mata amid themselves with a well decorated photograph of hers, and sing her Bhetans, accompanied by instrumental music in which Dholak plays the leading part. The songs are interrupted in between by the chants of 'Jai Mata Di'. At the end or earlier, all the present are treated to a refreshment. Prasad is distributed only when the ceremony is over.

In this way, the Mata's devotees invoke her to bless them at their own places in the form of a flame which is lit at the commencement of the ritual and kept burning throughput the night.

The main objective of Jagaran is to seek the Mata's blessings, or some material benefit, or to repay her for the one already obtained. On some family functions, such as marriage, birth of a child, or recovery from a serious illness also, it is held by the devotees of the Mata. Anyone, irrespective his caste, creed or sex, can participate in it.

Usually it is conducted by a group of 4 to 5 or more persons known as a Mandli. They now use not only musical instruments, but also microphones and loud speakers.

The recitation of the story of Maharani Tara Rani also forms a part of the Jagarna. In the words of a scholar, "Although this story does not find any place either in the Puranas or history books, yet during the Mata's Jagarna it is customary to recite it" and the Mata's devotees treat it as true. Whether it actually took place or not is none of their concern to know.

The story goes that in ancient times there was a king named Daksha (not sati's father). He was blessed with two daughters, Tara Rani and Rukmani. Both were great devotees of Durga, held fasts on Ikadashi and used to attend Jagarnas.

Once, Rukmani took non-vegetarian meals by mistake. Her elder sister cursed her to be worthy of a lizard. And she did become a lizard in her next birth, while Tara Rani was reborn as a fairy in the Inderloka.

In the Duapar Yuga the Pandavas organized the Asvamedha and invited numerous sages to participate in it. Durvana Rishi nursed a grudge against the Pandavas. With a view to spoiling their ceremony, he took the form of a bird, picked up a snake, and quietly threw it in the pot of boiling Kheer or the sweet dish of rice and milk for the guests. Rukmani, the lizard, happened to watch it. She jumped into the pot of Kheer, which had turned poisonous, before the very sight of many. The kheer had become unserviceable, according to them, because of the lizard. But when the truth dawned upon them, they appreciated the sacrifice of the lizard, and prayed for her rebirth as a human being.

Accordingly, Rukmani was born as a daughter of Raja Separsh in her third birth, while Tara Rani became Taramati and wife of Raja Harish Chandra.

But as luck would have it, the former, considered unlucky for her father, was consigned to a river in a box filled with riches. A scavenger of Kashi chanced to pick up the box, and began to bring up the girl as Ruko.

Later, she was married to a youth of Ayodhya, whose mother worked as a sweeper in the house of Raja Harish Chandra. There, the two sisters happened to meet and recognize each other. Taramati was a great devotee of Mata Vaishno

Devi. On her suggestions, Ruko vowed to hold a Jagarna in honour of the Mata if she got a son. She, however, came to recollect it when her son suffered from small-pox. A Jagarna was then arranged, in which Taramati also participated. Her husband detested to get in touch with low-caste people. Hence, Taramati went secretly to Ruko's house for Jagarna without seeking his permission.

Harish Chandra had already got the wind of her wife's intentions. Hence, he followed her and confronted her on her return. She had brought Prasad for her husband also. Harish Chandra, therefore, accused her of the intention to pollute him also. But the Prasad immediately turned into beautiful flowers, uncooked rice and nuts. The Raja witnessed this miracle with his own eyes.

On their return to their palace, another miracle, struck him. Taramati produced light (fire) without a match stick or rubbing of stones. An intense desire was then born in him to have the Mata's Darshan. He even severed his son Rohit's head for the fulfillment of his desire. Soon the Mata appeared before him. Blessed him, his dead son turned alive, and then disappeared thereafter.

Later, both the sisters and Raja Harish Chandra achieved salvation.

The moral of this story is very clear-for the Mata there is no distinction of any kind between her followers, and that whosoever propitiate her with reverences, single-mindedness and piety is granted all of his wishes.

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## 6

# Administration of the Shrine

### BARIDARS

Normally, a shrine or temple must have one or more priests to conduct prayers, and they must have a source of income for sustenance.

The Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi also had priests. They were the forefathers of Pandit Sridhar, who had been serving there from certain pint of time, and the offerings made by the Mata's devotees formed their source of income.

With the passage of time, however, the income of the Shrine expanded, and so also did the family of Sridhar. A flame of discord was consequently lit among the various branches of the priest's family over their share in the income of the Shrine. To add fuel to the fire, some Rajput families settled around the Shrine claimed that they were the guardians of the Shrine - and, therefore, entitled to a share in its income.

Good sense, however, prevailed over all of them, and the Brahman priests, who belonged to the Samnotra subcaste, and the Rajput guardians worked out an agreement. According to it, each priestly family was assigned particular days of a month when it's member would conduct the prayers at the shrine, and collect the offerings, and a part of these offerings would go to a particular section of the Rajputs as well. In other words, every claimant, family was to have its turn, locally called Vari or Barrie and those who, thus, began to share the shrine's income came to be known as Baridars.

## DHARMARTH TRUST

The Baridars were sincere and devoted to their calling in the beginning. Gradually, however, money came to matter more with some of them than service to the Mata and her devotees. The Shrine and the pilgrims, consequently, became victims of the lamentable indifferent to their part.

Gulab Singh, the founder of the Jammu and Kashmir State, had a first hand knowledge and experience of the conditions at the Mata's Darbar. He had been occasionally undertaking pilgrimage to the Shrine from an early age. When he took up the reins of the government in his hands as Maharaja in 1846 A.D. he was determined to contribute towards its improvement.

In the very year of his accession, he created an endowment called the Treasury of Sri Raghunathji with a personal donation of rupees five lakhs, and put it under the charge of his son Ranbir Singh. The interest which accrued on this amount was to be spent for the benefit of the Shrine of the Mata Vaishno Devi and other temples, besides for other religious activities.

It was with the money drawn out of this fund, which was latter called the Dharmarth Treasury. A grand Dharmshala was built for the stay of the pilgrims at the Mata's Bhawan accordingly.

The credit of placing the Treasury on a sound and permanent basis goes, however, to Maharaja Ranbir Singh (1857-85). He drew proper rules and regulations, called Ain-i-Dharmarth for the organization which itself was rechristened as the Dharmarth Trust.

Effective from 1884 A.D., the Ain laid down the aims and objectives of the Dharmarth Trust as under:-

(a) Establishment and maintenance of Sadavrats (free kitchens) at various places of Hindu pilgrimage and worship.

(b) Establishment, supervision and maintenance of various temples, Dharmshalas, Gaushallas, Pathshalas, Dispensaries, public wells and tanks,

(c) Performance of Puja and its supervision at various places of Hindu worship,

(d) Recitation of Vedas, Puranas and other sacred books for the moral and spiritual benefits of the people.

(e) Spread of the knowledge of the Sanskrit, and propagation of teachings of Shruties and smritis.

(f) Collection and translation of religious books, and

(g) Spread of the Sanatan Dharma through preaching and teaching.

This was the first government attempt to extend its control indirectly and in a general way over the Hindu religious places. It was thus now to overview the conduct of prayers and worship there, and carry out repairs wherever needed.

For the administration of the Trust, the Maharaja constituted a Council, and his three sons. Pratab Singh, Ram Singh and Amar Singh, were made its trustees. It was impressed upon them that the Dharmarth Trust funds were to be spent on the purposes specified in the Ain and for no other purpose, and that whatsoever violated this sacred in junction "shall be guilty of having committed sins against all the Tirthas."

The Dharmarth Trust, under Maharaja Ranbir Singh not only improved the service of worship and facilities at the Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi, but also built a number of big and small temples in the Jammu city, which gave it the name of the city of temples.

The Baridars continued to enjoy their old privileges, but their conduct was now regulated. They were thus put under an obligation to conduct the Puja or worship at the Mata's shrine twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, punctually and with devotion. Karah or pudding, and Nayivedya were to be distributed freely among the pilgrims by them.

The Dharmarth Trust took upon itself to keep in its stock and supply to the pilgrims at the Bhawan all the essential brass and iron utensils in good condition, sufficient for at least fifty persons, for the cooking of meals.

The Sudavrats were run at the Bhawan by the Trust for the Indigenent people only, and a monthly report of the quantity of various cereals used for this purpose was submitted to the management of the Trust.

Accommodation to the pilgrims was provided free of charge in the Sarais of the Trust, with the condition that no one was allowed to stay there for more than a week.

The Ain also provided the appointment of certain officials for day-to- day functions. Thus, a treasurer for keeping the cash, a guard for its safe custody, a Munshi to look after the arrangements for Sadavrats, and a Mohtamin as an overall incharge were the main officials at the Bhawan. Kathawachaks. Pracharaks and musicians were also appointed to recite religious stories, hold discourses and play musical instruments at the time of prayers, respectively.

The duties of the Mohtamin included to (a) protect the life and property of the pilgrims; (b) guard the general property against fire; (c) see that Karah or pudding and Nayivedya were freely distributed among the devotees without fail; (d) make sure that the required utensils for the pilgrims are in stock; (e)see that only the indigent persons are fed at the Sadavrats; (f) keep the whole track from Bal Ganga to the Bhawan and the Buildings there clean with the help of sweepers; (g) look after the garden attached to the Shrine; (h) get the accommodation allotted to the Trust's employees at the Bhawan vacated for the pilgrims when their number demands, (i) provide medical aid through a physician at Katra and also at the Bhawan during the days of rush of pilgrims, (j) post two sepoys, with silver maces in their hands, at the mouth of the holy cave; (k) arrange for the wiping out of the soot of oil lamps getting deposited on the walls and rocks of the holy cave at least once a week; (l) keep an accounts book of Atka fund at the Shrine for an easy inspection by anyone who wishes to do it: and (in) invest the donations received in profitable trade.

The Trust was ordained to meets its expenses from the income it derived from various endowments, cultivable lands, gardens and forests attached to it, rents from its commercial complexes, interests on loans and deposits, offerings and donations received at various Shrines, etc.

As referred to above, the Trust had arranged to place at the Mata's Bhawan an accounts book of Atka for nothing down the pilgrims' donations to the Dharmarth Trust. All the offerings made by them inside the holy cave formed the sole property of the Baridars.

The major heads of expenditure of the Trust included the salary of the staff, Sadavrats, Yatra-grants, donatations and charities, Hawans, Naivedya, festivals, Dharm Parchar, Harijan welfare, forests development, scholarships to the students and, of course, the construction, repair, and maintenance of temples.

When Maharaja Ranbir Singh passed away in 1885, the Dharmarth had accumulated a sum of rupees 30 lakhs, out of which 13 lakhs were spent on the construction of a railway line between the Jammu City and Suchetgarh in 1890, linking the State with the Punjab.

In the time of his successors, Maharaja Pratap Singh, after the death of Raja Ram Singh in 1898 and Raja Amar Singh in 1909, became the Sole Trustee of the Dharmarth Trust. And in 1925, after Maharaja Pratap Singh left his immortal world, his nephew Hari Singh ascended the throne, and also assumed the Sole Trusteeship of the Dharmarth Trust.

In 1935, Maharaja Hari Singh took a decision of far-reaching consequences. He made the Trust independent of the government control, and vested its management exclusively in the Dharmarth Council. Detailed instructions regarding the formation of this Council, management of the Trust, and powers of its various functionaries were also then issued.

Subsequently, by means of an indenture on January 3, 1959, the Maharaja appointed his son Dr. Karan Singh as the President of the Dharmarth Council as well as the Sole Trustee of the Dharmarth Trust.

The members of the Council were appointed from amongst eminent Sanatani Hindus, with a background of religious and social service.

The head office of the Trust was located at Jammu and a regional office at Srinagar, looked after by a Secretary and a Deputy Secretary respectively.

With a view to associating the general Hindu public with its activities, the Trust constituted a number of Managing Committees and Regional Advisory Boards for Jammu and Kashmir separately. The members of the Managing Committees were mostly the local persons instilled with religious feelings. One such Committee was for the Katra Temple Complex, and the Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi fell under its jurisdiction.

When the rush of pilgrims to the Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi mounted with the passage of time, the strength of the staff of the Trust connected with it also had to be raised. Thus, in 1958, the post of the Mohtamin was upgraded and designated as the Manager. To assist him, first one (1965) and then three Assistant Managers (1979), besides a Deputy Manager, were appointed. gradual increase in the priestly staff also appeared.

The budget of the Dharmarth Trust naturally showed a rising graph. We have already referred to a big sum spent on the construction of Jammu- Suchetgarh Railway in 1890. After the country was partitioned in 1947, a large number of refugees streaked into the State territories from West Pakistan, the Trust rendered yeomen service to them by providing them shelter in its Dharmshalas and distributing among them food and clothing worth 15 lakhs of rupees.

Widening and repairing of the track from Bal Ganga to the Bhawan, and construction and maintenance of Dharmshallas at Jammu, Katra, Adi Kumari, Sanji Chhat and the Darbar had formed the usual activities of the Trust for the benefit of the pilgrims to Mata Vaishno Devi. But its monumental contribution consisted in providing a second exit tunnel at the Bhavan in 1977 at a huge cost.

To quote the figures, the annual budget of the Trust for 1959-60 was Rs. 5.10 lakhs. It rose to Rs. 61.47 lakhs in 1980-81, 27 and to rupees one crore in 1985-86. About half of it came from the shrine of Vaishno Devi, forty percent of which was ploughed back on its improvement.

As we scan our past history, we observe a striking tendency on the part of many rulers to regard the establishment, maintenance and protection of religious and charitable institutions as their divine duty.

The things were not much different in the Jammu Region also. Many Chiefs of this area had been patronizing such institutions since long. The Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi also had been the recipient of rich gifts and grants of land quite occasionally.

The people also had been instilled with the belief that the gods and goddess whom the Chiefs liberally patronized especially protect their persons as well as their kingdoms.

In other words, what was consciously projected to the public was a sort of alliance between the Chiefs and the gods or goddesses. Little wonder, the public came to treat the Chiefs as the divine representatives and any defiance of their authority was regarded as an act of apostasy.

The control of religious Shrines was naturally vested with the Chiefs in the past. But in the case of the Chiefs of the Jammu Region, in the first instance, there was no big public Shrine in this area which a particular Chief could exploit for the benefit, either to extend his territory or authority over the public. Purmandal, the most important of all the sacred centers of pilgrimage in ancient India, was equally venerated by all the local Chiefs, besides the outsiders. Hence, no one could hope to derive any benefit out of its control. Secondly, the number of local Chiefs was too large and their power practically too balanced to allow them this opportunity.

But the vicissitudes of time introduced new elements in the situation. With the appearance of Dhruv Dev and Ranjit Dev on the political scence in the Jammu Region began the trend towards centralisation. More than ever was then felt the need of pubic co-operation to consolidate their rule, and alliance with the priestly class and exercise control over the religious Shrines could undoubtedly play a crucial role in this direction.

None was as intelligent as Maharaja Gulab Singh to realize this fact. Though stern, yet he proceeded cautiously and tactfully. He knew that the religious and charitable institutions always badly needed money. Hence, he instituted the

Dharmarth Treasury for their benefit. His son and successor used this instrument more successfully, notwithstanding his and the other members of his family's intention to serve and propagate Hinduism.

In the case of Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine, which had shot up into prominence much later than Purmandal, we have noted that the interests of the Baridars had not been interfered with. This single concession bound together, through strong mutual obligations, both the Baridars and the Maharaja of the State; and the latter were placed in most propitious circumstances to manage the Shrine, its affairs and property as they demand fit.

But the independence of the country set in a process of significant changes in every field. The government of Jammu and Kashmir passed into the hands of popular leaders. In 1952 was abolished the hereditary Princely rule.

No doubt, the Dharmarth Trust, managing the affairs of Vaishno Devi's Shrine, had been taken away from the control of the government earlier, the loss of sovereignty by its Sole Trustee in 1952 cast an adverse influence on his position. Mata Vaishno Devi in general and Lord Rama in particular had been indirectly but strongly acting as the guardians of the rulers of the State against their political and other enemies. These deities had come to be identified with the State through an elaborate set of rituals. It is a matter of common knowledge that the functions like Ram Naumi, Dussehra and Chhari Amarnath were famous for their pomp and show because the Maharajas patronized them. In fact, all such occasions meant a display of their authority.

And there was no break off in these functions even after 1947 or 1952; these continued to be held, but gone was the display of old authority. The ex-ruler or a number of his family did take part in them even now, but with little enthusiasm. The cost of such functions also then escalated. As a result, the royal house gradually distanced itself from them, and so did the reverential gratitude for them in the public mind.

The fall in the power of the Sole Trustee of Dharmarth Trust impacted his hold over the affairs of the Shrines also under its control.

The Baridars of the Mata's Shrine became more lax in the performance of their duties. Unwanted practices also crept into the working at the Shrine when the volume of pilgrimage began to expand by leaps and bounds.

In nut-shell, the deplorable conditions at the Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi were signal warnings, too pregnant to be disregarded by all those who were concerned with its management. But while the Baridars were mostly occupied in amassing a fortune, the Dharmarth Trust had neither the will nor adequate resources to do much on its own. There was naturally a public outcry for the State intervention.

## SHRI MATA VAISNO DEVI SHRINE BOARD

In India, the religious and political authorities stand practically inseparately inter-wined with each other. The lack of any ecclesiastical structure particularly makes it impossible to introduce formally any internal reform into the system. The government of India has, accordingly, been often pressed into services as an agency for religious reform. Even under the British, it had to regulate and administer many large and important Shrines. Thus, about 12 thousand temples and monastic institutions in Orisa alone, including the famous Chandi Temple of Cuttack, are presently governed under the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1951- later amended in 1969.

The Himachal Pradesh Legislature also passed a Bill in 1984 vide which 11 major temples in the State, including those of Naina Devi, Jawalla Mukhi, Chintapurni and Kangravali Devi, were made accountable to a Commissioner. The temple of Mansa Devi in Haryana, too, is practically controlled by the State Government.

In 1986, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir also was called upon to intervene in the affairs of the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine. Shri Jagmohan, the then Governor of the State, issued an ordinance on August 30, 1986, by which was instituted the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board to mange and control the pilgrimage as well as the Shrine in place of the Dharmarth Trust. This ordinance was confirmed by the State Legislature on August 31, 1988, which then became an Act.

The Act lays down that the Board shall -

(a) arrange for the proper performance of worship at the Shrine, and Provide facilities to the pilgrims for the same;

(b) make arrangements for the safe custody and preservation of the funds, securities and jewellery belonging to the Shrine;

(c) construct buildings for the accommodation of pilgrims and sanitary works;

(d) improve means of communication;

(e) develop the Shrine and the area around it;

(f) make suitable arrangements for the promotion of religious instruction and general education;

(g) make provision for the payment of suitable emoluments to the salaried staff; and

(h) undertake all such measures as may be incidental and conducive to the efficient management, maintenance and administration of the Shrine Fund, the Shrine itself and the pilgrimage to it.

All the property, moveable and immovable, including the route from Katra to the Mata's Bhawan, the areas and hills around it, the Shrine itself, including the idols installed therein, and the property attached to it, which was formerly under the management of the Dharmarth Trust or belonged to the Baridars or their Association, now passed on under the control and management of the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board.

The rights of the Dharmarth Trust, the Baridars and others who had any concern with the Mata's Shrine were now vested with Shrine Board.

With a view to determining the payment of compensation to the Baridars, it was contemplated to set up a Tribunal. Those of the Baridars who were willing to serve the Shrine Board in a suitable capacity were assumed of it.

The shopkeepers and other lease holders, who were the rentees of the Dharmarth Trust were hereafter to be the rentees of the Shrine Board. The same was to be the case of the employees of the Dharmarth Trust, unless, of course, they opted not to serve the Shrine Board.

The Act further provides that the Board is required to prepare an annual report on the administration of the affairs of the Shrine, and to publish it for the information of public. Its accounts are to be audited annually by a Chartered Accountant.

The administration, management and governance of the Mata's Shrine are vested in a Board comprising a Chairman and not more than ten members.

The Governor of Jammu and Kashmir State is to be the ex-officio Chairman of the Board. In case he is not a Hindu, he has to nominate an eminent Hindu personality to be its Chairman.

The other nine members of the Board are to be nominated by the Governor in the following manner:

- Two persons who have distinguished themselves in the service of Hindu religion or culture, two women who have distinguished themselves in the service of Hindu religion, culture or social work, especially in regard to the advancement of women; three persons who have distinguished themselves in the fields of administration, legal affairs and financial matters; and two eminent Hindu personalities belonging to Jammu and Kashmir.

- All the nominated members of the Board are to hold their office for a term of three years or till such time new members are nominated in their place.

In case the chairman of the board is not satisfied with its working, he is authorized to suspend it, and take over its functions. The individual members of the board can also be removed by the chairman if he is dissatisfied with their working. In case anyone of them is found to have misused, or misappropriated the funds of the Board, or caused loss to it owing to his negligence or bad intentions, he can be sued in a court of law for the recovery of it.

The quorum required for any meeting of the Shrine Board is fixed at four, and any decision taken by the Board in a meeting attended by less than four members is not to carry the stamp of legality. The Board is authorized to appoint, for the efficient discharge of the functions assigned to it, a Chief Executive Officer and such other officers and employees as it considers necessary with such designations, pay, allowance and other remuneration and prerequisites as it may determine from time to time.

The chief Executive Officer has, however, not to be less in rank than that of a District Magistrate of the District, and the Chief Accounts Officers not less than that of a Deputy Director of Accounts. All the officers and employees of the Shrine board are to be treated as public servants, liable to be punished or dismissed if found guilty of indiscipline, in sufficiency, negligence or dereliction of duty.

In 2004, the board further broadened its wings by establishing Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University at Katra. This university was inaugurated by the then President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, an academician and an administrator par excellence on August 19, 2004. This premier educational institution is devoted towards the advancement, research and development in the field of Science, technology, engineering and philosophy.

The modus operandi of prayers may change, but the faith persists. The circumstances leading to pilgrimage may undergo change but 'Astha' or devotion continues. The methods of worship may differ from region to region, town to town and clan to clan, but Mata Vaishno Devi's blessings keep on multiplying "for one and all"

Mata Vasino Devi cave is the eternal symbol of identity for the inhabitants of Jammu on the national map, the ever increasing influx of tourists and pilgrims to

Mata's Shrine makes it an economic mainstay for the Jammuties, Indeed, prayers go up and blessings come down and Matarani is bestowing upon all devotees HER BLESSINGS in abundance.

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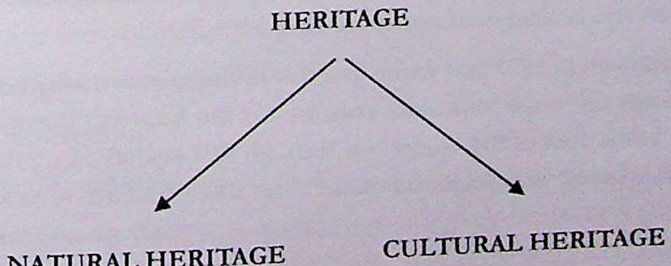
# 7

# The Soft Power of Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine

Before dwelling upon the far reaching soft impact of Holy Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi of Jammu, it is pertinent to first throw light on the concept of Heritage as a Soft Power. Heritage refers to valued object and qualities such as historic buildings and traditions that have been passed down from previous generations. In other words, Heritage is what we derive from the past what has been handed down to us by our ancestor. It may be Tangible Heritage in the form of Monuments, Temples, Architectural Structures, art objects and even articles of everyday use; or intangible Heritage in the form of classical music and dance, folk songs and dances, drama, literature, languages, Cinema etc. In addition, customs and traditions that are unique to our culture and community are also heritages since we inherit them from our forefathers. These combine to give a unique cultural identity to the people who live in a particular area:-

**Heritage is broadly categorized into two divisions**



## HERITAGE AS A SOFT POWER:

Culture has no boundaries, and using it as a medium to interact with the masses has been the most effective and proven way to win hearts in the era of globalization. Interacting through culture gives us a chance to interact and understand the great cultural heritage of the world. India's Culture, Civilization, Literature Philosophy, diplomacy and political organization is often considered as 'intangible indicators' of its soft power". To speak of India's place in the world today, there is no better template than its culture, which has become a source of attraction in the transcending considerations of economic growth, military strength or population numbers. That's its "SOFT POWER".

The notion of soft power is relatively new in international discourse. The term was first coined by Harvard's JOSEPH NYE to describe the extraordinary strengths of the United States that went well beyond American Militancy dominance. Nye argued that, "Power is the ability to alter the behavior of others to get what you want and there are three ways to do that" - coercion (Sticks), Payments (Carrots) and attraction. (Soft Power). Truly, Joseph Nye has put forth, "If you are able to attract others, you can economize on the sticks and carrots."

Traditionally, power in world politics was seen in terms of military power: the side with the larger army was likely to win. But in the past, this adage seems to loose ground as US has lost the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union was defeated in Afghanistan and China has been repeatedly unsuccessful in overpowering Indian Army towards its North Eastern frontiers. Here enters soft power as an alternative to hard power and as a compliment to it. To quote Nye again, "The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources, its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign polities (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)".

The roots of India's Soft Power run deep. Culturally, India is a superpower. India's Self definition has for long been replete with visions of soft power, much before Joseph Nye coined this concept in 1990.

E.P. Thompson in 1977 had wrote that this heritage of diversity is what makes India, "perhaps the most important country for the future of the world. All the convergent influences of the world run through this society ........ there is not a thought that is being thought in the west or east that is not active in some Indian Mind."

Soft power is not about conquering others, but about just being yourself. It is created partly by governments and partly despite governments; partly by deliberate action, partly by accident. The construction of the national image, before and after independence, put forward the fact that much of India's influence has resulted from the entrepreneurship of her merchants and the dissemination, pacifically, of her ideas.

The spread of Hindu concepts in arts and beliefs form Angkor Wat to Bali, and expansion of Buddhism to China, Japan and Korea are testimonies to the fact." "The travels to India of Chinese monks Fa Hien (4th Century) or Yi Jing (7th Century) illustrate, on the other way, India's attractiveness. Much later, 'The travel to the West' became a classic of Chinese Literature. Occasionally, during Indo-Chinese Summits, this legacy of soft power of India's history and heritage is still recalled.

## SOFT POWER OF MATA VAISHNO DEVI SHRINE:

While Culture has always been a decisive dimensions of India's Soft power, its obvious mainstay is Religion, that acts as a way of living. The mode of worship, its rituals, belief, faith and the cultural diversity in its spread render unique beauty and flavour to the India's civilizational ethos.' These assets may or may not directly persuade others to support India, but they go a long way toward enhancing India's tangible standing in the world's eye. Definitely, one such place of pride of every Indian is the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi; situated in the extreme North, Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir of India.

## SHAKTISM IN JAMMU:

The Jammu province embraces the hilly country extending down to the plains of the Punjab from the snowy range of the mountains bounding Kashmir on the South. The area is more than double of Kashmir Province, viz., 12, 165 Square Miles. Jammu is undoubtedly pilgrim's paradise. A reference of the place is found in the following verse of Mahabharata:

Jambumargam Samavishya

Devish Pitrasevitan

Ashwamedham Maraproti

Sarvakam Semanvita

which means a pilgrim to Jambumarga, the place of Gods and Saints and ancestors is bestowed with fruits of Ashvamedh Yagya and all his wishes are fulfilled.

Indeed, there are few cities in the world that have temples as numerous or diverse as does Jammu. It is because of this that Jammu is popularly known as the City of Temples. A large number of shrines dedicated to various forms of Shakti can be found scattered throughout the Jammu region as well as in the city of Jammu. Some of these shrines have attained a nationwide reputation of which the famous cave shrine of Vaishno Devi is the most important as the Goddess here (Vaishno Devi) incarnates herself in all the three forms of Mahakali, Mahalaxmi and Mahasarasvati; and is the most powerful one. The other shrines spread throughout the Jammu region are specifically devoted to one of the various forms of Goddess; although, all Goddesses are considered basically as one or the other form of the same Goddess. Besides Mata Vaishno Devi, Mata Sarthal Devi, situated near Kishtwar (in the Doda District) of Goddess Sharika, Sukrala Devi Temple, situated 9 kms from Billawar, the shrine of Balaji Sundari sealed in the village of Nagari in the town of Kathua, Chichi Mata Temple on the Jammu – Pathankot National Highway near Samba and Mahakali Temple at Bahu Fort overlooking River Tawi in Jammu are the most famous Prominent Shakti Shrines of Jammu Region.

## MATA VAISHNO DEVI IN HISTORICITY

Goddess Worship was once common all over the world. In Japan, she was Amaterasu – the Sun-Goddess; in Greece-she was Demeter, the Corn-Goddesses; in Egypt, she was Isis, the river Goddess. The Vikings (Scandinavia) called her Frejya, the Eskimos (of Arctic Circle) Called her SEDNA, the Romans knew her as ARTEMIS. She was the Tibetan TARA, the Mexican COATLICUE, the Babylonian ISHTAR and the Indian SHAKTI.

In every place, she was the same: life bestow, nourisher, loving, comforter and final Killer. She was the Mother-Goddess, who resided in dark or sat on pink lotuses surrounded by birds animals, spinning the web of life and kneading the earth with life-giving sap.

To trace the origin of Mata Vaishno Devi is the most difficult knot for the student of History. If the age of the Trikuta hills ranges between 5 to 6 billion years (pre-Cambrian age), then, the moot question is: when did the pindis begin to be worshipped? Mythologically, Goddess existed in epic age and even earlier as the destroyer of different demons and the savior of Gods. Ask any follower of the faith, answer would be: she is timeless and has existed ever since the origin of universe.

Historically, Devi Mahatamaya of the Markandya Purana of 6th century refers to her as one of the Goddesses who forms a specific group of the seven matas or saptmatrikas. Varaha Purana of 19th century also makes mention of 8 Saktis; namely-Yogeshwari, Maheshwari, Brahmani, Kawmari, Indriya, Yamadanda dhera, Varahi and Vaishnavi. She is also extolled in Kalika Purans of the 10th -11th century where as Devi **Bhagvata** of the 11th-12th century establishes her as a Supreme Goddess, so does Narada Purana in 16th-17th century. To the best of human memory and as per the Oral tradition of the region, it was Pandit **Shridhar**, a poor farmer and devotee of Shakti, who had discovered the 98 feet long cave-shrine of Sri Mata Vaishno Devi Ji around the 10th century A.D. He lived in a small village called Hansali, which is a little more than a mile away from where Katra now is, and has the famous Bhumika temple.

As per one scholar, it was as early as 7th century, when Raja Kirtidhar has come here for repentance of his sins. He is also credited to have installed a statue of Mata Vaishno Devi inside his palace. Also, reference is made of Raja Jasdev, the founder of Jasrota, to have paid an obeisance in the Durbar of Goddess in 11th century. Historians also claim the visit of tenth Guru of Sikhs, Guru Govind Singh Ji, in 1672 who had invoked the Goddess to seek her blessings in the battle,. Similarly, Vir Banda Bairagi, often visited the Holy Shrine.

The local rulers had both faith and reverence for the Deity. Raja Kirpal Dev of Bahu in eighteenth century, Raja Ranit Dev, Maharaja Gulab Singh and the following Dogra Rulers had deep belief in her. Mian Dido, the great General of the Dogra land is known for his faith in the magnificience of the Shrine. It is a known fact that in 1822, Maharaja Gulab Singh was bestowed with the Raj of Jammu by Sher-i-Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the former had signed the treaty in the name of "Mata Vaishno Devi' only. It was also referred in Census report of 1911.

The Tirath Yatra or pilgrimage to this majestic **shrine** of Goddess is unintererrupted since then. Maharaja Hari Singh brought the headquarters of the Reasi District nearer to Jammu by starting a road from Katra to Suketar. This motor road had branched off at Suketar (18 miles from Jammu on the Banihal cart Road) and had terminated at Katra town. This road definitely proved to be a great advantage for the worshippens of Mata Vaishno Devi. However, the landmark event of the start of Rail link between Jammu and Pathankot in 1972, had made the accessibility to the Shrine easier. Post independence was gradually the time when the fame and majesty of Mata's Durbar reached far and wide and she emerged as an important Pilgrimage Destination on a National and International canvas.

But now she is known as Mata Vaishno Devi. In the local dialect of the Jammu region where her shrine is located, the names such as Tara and Krishna come to be spoken as Taro and Krishno, Vaishnavi also, in a similar way, appears to have taken the form of Vaishno with the passage of time.

## Yatra Information...

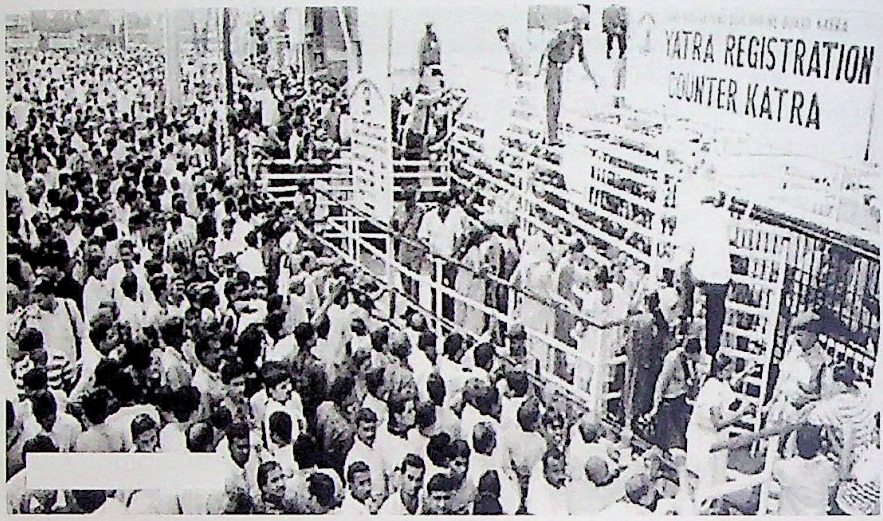
Ever since the inception of Shrine Board in 1986, the Holy Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi has witnessed an ever-increasing Yatris. The Yatra that stood at 13.96 Lakhs in the year 1986, increased to 79.4 Lacs (7.9 Million) in the year 2019. The increasing number of Yatris is possible due to the efficient and pilgrim oriented management of the Shrine Board. The following Table depicts the average of the years from 1986 to 2020

| S. No. | Year | No. of Yatries (in Lakhs) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | 1986 | 13.96 |
| 2. | 1987 | 18.58 |
| 3. | 1988 | 19.92 |
| 4. | 1989 | 23.12 |
| 5. | 1990 | 21.69 |
| 6. | 1991 | 31.15 |
| 7. | 1992 | 35.16 |
| 8. | 1993 | 33.69 |
| 9. | 1994 | 37.05 |
| 10. | 1995 | 40.11 |
| 11. | 1996 | 43.35 |
| 12. | 1997 | 44.34 |
| 13. | 1998 | 46.22 |
| 14. | 1999 | 46.70 |
| 15. | 2000 | 52.17 |
| 16. | 2001 | 50.57 |
| 17. | 2002 | 44.32 |
| 18. | 2003 | 54.00 |

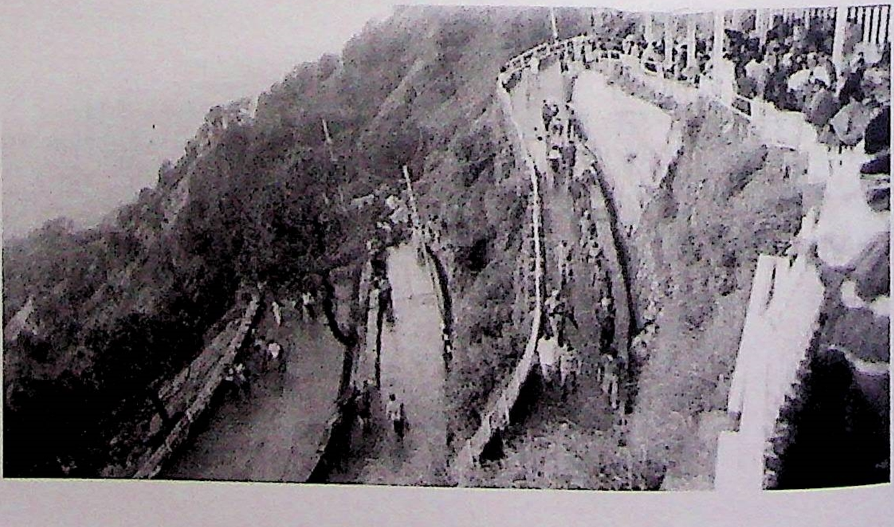
| S. No. | Year | No. of Yatries (in Lakhs) |
|---|---|---|
| 19. | 2004 | 61.00 |
| 20. | 2005 | 62.52 |
| 21. | 2006 | 69.50 |
| | | 69.50 |
| 22. | 2007 | 74.17 |
| 23. | 2008 | 67.92 |
| 24. | 2009 | 82.35 |
| 25. | 2010 | 87.49 |
| 26. | 2011 | 101.15 |
| 27. | 2012 | 104.95 |
| 28. | 2013 | 93.245 |
| 29. | 2014 | 78.03 |
| 30. | 2015 | 77.76 |
| 31. | 2016 | 77.23 |
| 32. | 2017 | 81.78 |
| 33. | 2018 | 85.59 |
| 34. | 2019 | 79.40 |
| 35. | 2020 | 17.20 |
| 36. | However, in the wake of Covid-19 Pandemic, the yatra to this shrine has also been greatly affected. | |

## EVER GROWING RUSH OF PILGRIMS

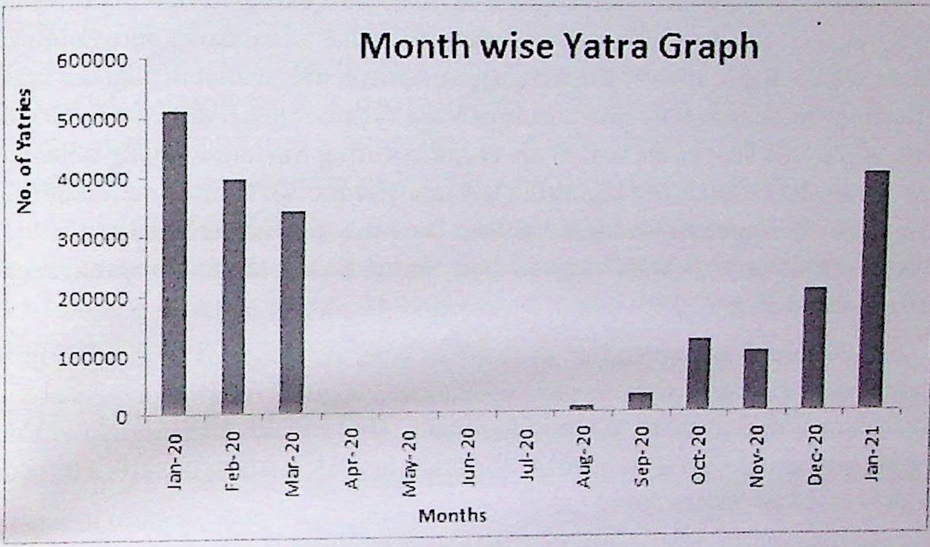
M.K Narayan had once said, "Soft power has always been part of India's legacy and we take pride that the message of India was spread beyond our region without recourse to arms",

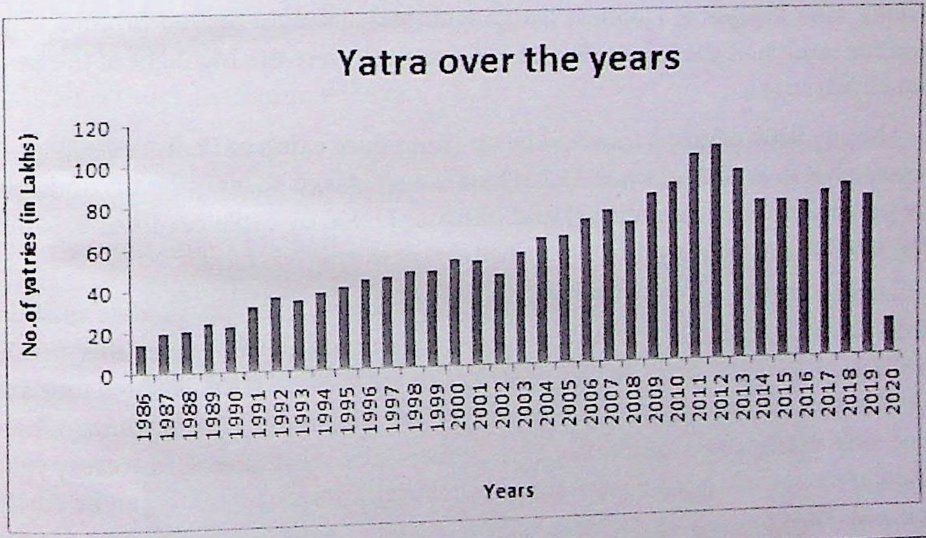


In this regard, the soft power of Mata Vaishno Devi is just immense. Ever since the inception of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board in 1986 by the then Governor of Jammu and Kashmir the holy Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi has witnessed an ever-increasing number of devotees. The numberthat had jumped to 104.95 lakhs in the year 2012. In the year 2018, record number of 1.60 crore tourists visited Jammu region, of which unprecedented number of 85.959 (in lakhs) pilgrims paid obeisance at the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Cave Shrine and so far, till October 2019, 67,91,712 (in lakhs) pilgrims had already visited the Shrine. The swelling of number of 'Yatra' has been possible due to the efficient and pilgrim friendly management of the Shrine Board The following table depicts the annual Yatra figures over the years from 1986 to 2018.



## PEOPLE ENROUTE TO THE HOLY SHRINE OF SHRI. MATA VAISHNO DEVI SHRINE





## HUGE IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY

Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Ji is the mainstay of Jammu's prestige as well as our economy. The money that these lakhs and lakhs of yatris inject into the economy is responsible for much of employment and affluence generated in the region. Take away this pilgrimage and there will be little left of Jammu tourism. In 1998 and many subsequent years, 86 percent of all tourists in Kashmir had gone there after a pilgrimage to the Holy Bhawan The valley too enjoys her munificence.

Not withstanding disturbed conditions in the state earlier in view of Pulwama attack on Feb. 14, 2019 followed by Indian air strike at Balakote, abrogation of Article 370 on Aug 5, 2019 by the Indian government, over 6 million pilgrims have performed darshan at holy cave Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi JI this year by Oct. 8, 2019, while 3.64 lakh yatris visited the Bhawan during Navratras, falling between Sept. 29 to Oct. 7, 2019, the highest in last many years. "Over 62.40 lakh pilgrims have paid obeisance to Goddess Vaishno Devi this year so far". had said Chief Executive Officer, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board, Sh. Simrandeep Singh had informed.

In the month of September, as many as 6,56, 167 pilgrims visited the holy shrine, where as the Navratras saw over 3,64,643 pilgrims offering prayers at the Shrine at an average of 40, 515 devotees daily. About 2 lakh pilgrims had visited the Shrine during Navratras in 2014, 2.76 lakhs in 2015, 2.5 lakh in 2016, 3.02 lakh in 2017 and 3.20 lakh in 2018.

The newly constructed 'Golden Gate' at the entrance of the cave shrine, having nine images of Goddess Durga with Mahalakshmi figured prominently, and the launch of the Vande Bharat Express train were the highlight of the year 2019's Navratras.

Nearly 5260 pilgrims travelled by air (from Base camp to Bhawan helicopter service is also available) while 51,224 had 'langar'. About 55,000 pilgrims travelled by ponies, palkies (palanquins) and pithoos; 71,000 by cable car from Vaishno Devi to Bhairon Ghati and 16,000 by battery car during Navratras.

Going by the data available, the average ratio of local tourists in Mata vaishno Devi Shrine to Non-local tourists arrivals is approximately 13:87. This firmly indicates that there is significant direct contribution of the Shrine related tourism on the economy of Katra in particular as well as Jammu and Kashmir. When one cites that not less than nine to ten million people visit the Shrine every year then, the enormity of transport, hotel and restaurant requirements can be easily gauged. Facilitating and meeting such needs of the devotees obviously entails huge employment opportunities and generate income to the people so through Jammu and Katra. The Shrine, thus, can be called as "A Journey of faith" having enormous socio-economic benefits to host population in particular and the militancy affected J&K region in particular. Just to get the glimpse of generation of income, we can take the example of accommodation built and managed by Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board. As per one survey, the total bed capacity of all the accommodation provided by the Shrine Board is 40,655 and it has generated a total rental income to the tune of 61.4 million rupees in 2006-07. In the similar view, for the same period, the offerings and donations amounted to crores and crores of rupees. As per the survey, it is estimated that there are 330 buses, 99 minibuses, 152 Vans/Taxis, that are rendering transport services to the pilgrims. Increased demand for bus transportation to Katra has facilitated local tour operators to expand their existing fleet of vehicles. Indeed, the list of economic booms of this Benevolent Shrine is endless and ever enhancing too.

The Vaishno Devi shrine received 1,800 kgs of gold and over 4,700 kgs of silver from devotees in the last two decades. According to RTI reply, the temple received a whooping Rs 2,000 crore cash between 2000 and 2020. The RTI was filed by Kumaon- based activist Hemant Gauniya.

## THE CULTURAL ROUTE

There is a famous 'Dogri' (local dialect) Lok Geet (folk Song), that refers to the stages of route to Mata Devi's Shrine;

Pahla darshan Kol Kandoli,

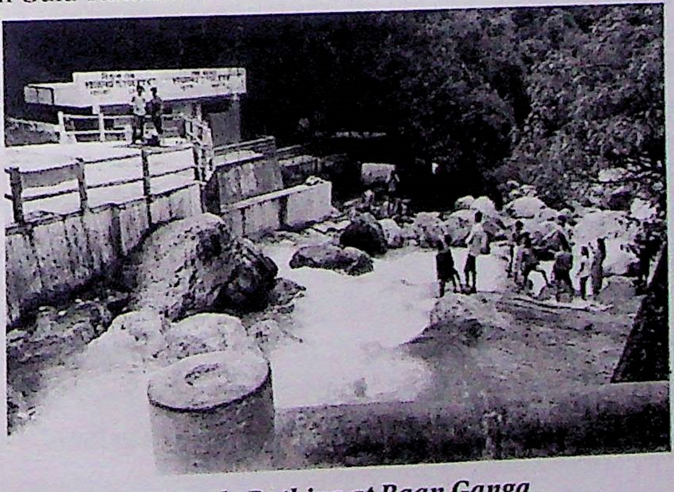
Duja Devi Mai,

Triya Darshan Charun Paduka.

Chotha Adh Kunwari,

Panjma Darshan Bhairo Ghati,

Cheman Gufa Tumahari.



***People Bathing at Baan Ganga***

(First stage of Route is 'Kol Kandoli, second is of Devi Mai third stage is at Charan Paduka. Adh Kunwari is the fourth step, Bhairo Ghati is the fifth darshan and the Holy Cave is the ultimate 6th Destination).

Mata Vaishno Devi mesmerises the people of all castes and walks of life, from the people of lowest state, who sport a decal with the slogan 'JAI MATA DI' to the rising urban middle-class professional to the high ranking government official Vaishno Devi Ji has also captured the imagination of popular media, Bolywood, artists, singers, folk dances, so on & so forth. In other words, Mata Vaishno Devi Ji is popular amongst the high and low alike.

## BEAUTIFUL DISPLAY OF CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS ENROUTE

The worship and rituals at the shrine of vaishno Devi are organized according to the regulations laid down in the Ain-1-Dharmarth. The whole pilgrimage is soul rendering. The pilgrims worshipping Vaishno Devi at Trikut mountain today trace the steps the Goddess took in her flight from Bhaironath. In pursuit to seek the blessings of Holy Diety, the pilgrims, on the commencement of their yatra from Katra, undergo unique pious experience. Only seeing, witnessing and participating is believing. The faith of the pilgrims in mother Divinity is unflinching and the main source of inspiration to undertake the arduous journey on foot, for many even bare foot.

On reaching Katra bazaar, the devotees enjoy the facility to purchase the items to offer at the main shrine, usually a packet including a coconut, sweets, sindur (red powder/vermillion), incense, mauli (red string to be worn around wrist) and a red chunni (scarf). Since no leather is allowed on the mountain, pilgrims often rent canvas shoes for the hike as well as other items such as umbrellas, flashlights and cameras. Most pilgrims prefer to climb on foot, either by the steep path with many stairs or by the longer but straight connecting path, while elderly and infirm may hire a pony. The whole pilgrimage route is a pure cultural one and is abreast with small temples and images, rest houses, tea stalls and bhojanalayas.

The atmosphere is simply exhuberant. Colorfully dressed pilgrims of all ages sing devotional songs as they walk the steep path. When the going gets tough, they loudly chant with full conviction the slogans like: "Mooh mangiyah Moradah Purey Karan Wali Mata, Twadi Sadahi jay, (May the Mother Goddess, who fulfills all over wishes and desires be hailed/worshipped always), Bol Sanche darbar ki jay (say, victory to the true court) and Jay Mata Di (Victory to the Mother). Groups chant in unison, adding line after line:

*Say it sofly: Jay Mata Di*

*Say it Loudly: Jay Mata Di*

*Say it with love: Jay Mata Di*

*People in the front: Jay Mata Di*

*People in the back: Jay Mata Di*

*Everybody say: Jay Mata Di*

*Remover of troubles : Jay Mata Di*

*Serawali : Jay Mata Di*

*Bestower of Blessings : Jay Mata Di*

After paying homage to the Bhagwati at Bhawan and making their offerings, the pilgrims are quickly ushered outside, where they receive part of their offerings back as Prasad from one of the attending priests; dry fruits, sweet misri, a bind on the forehead, a scarf, around the head, a red string (Dupatta or chunni) around the neck, bangles and few coins that are said to ensure wealth if kept with one's money. The contentment of having Holy Darshan is immense thereafter. The pilgrims begin their backward march again chanting in reverence: Jay Mata Di.

## FESTIVALS

The nine day autumn (Ashvin) navratras and the equally long (chaitr) spring navratras are considered the most auspicious time of the year to visit the holy shrine. Each household of the region is deeply engrossed in the worship of Mata Vaishno Devi, and with all purity and serenity observes fast and recite DURGE' SAPTSATI PATH. During the navratras the worship of Kanyas (young, unmarried, prepubescent girls) is considered highly auspicious. On the Asthami or Navmi (i.e. 8th or 9th day) of the navratras, nine girls, representing the Nine goddesses are fed a meal of puris (fried chapatti) and channas (Black gram) along with Halwa made in pure desi ghee (sweet dish), 'tika' is applied on their forehead, gifts including a red dupatta bestowed upon them, a string, preferably red in colour, tied on their wrist, besides giving some money to them. The successful 'Kanya Pujan' it is believed, yields many blessings upon the devotees. As per the oral tradition, after every pilgrims age or Tirath Yatra, thanks giving ceremony is conducted by the people by indulging in Kanjak or Kanya Pujan.

Besides, the shrine is also the chosen place for the performance of 'Mundane,' the first head shaving of a child, at the age of two or three.

## Conclusion

In nutshell, the revered shrine of Shri mata Vaishno Devi is an epitome' of prestige and identity for Jammuites in particular and the whole region in general. For our every auspicious occassin, it is almost an essential ritual to invoke her and seek her blessings. She is our hope in Despair; she is cause of our strength. She is our reason to follow the pure, pious and divine path, for who invokes her wrath and displeases her, is also punished by her. Mata Vaishno Devi is our reason to enkindle the noble path. This sacred place, besides being the mainstay of our economy, is the true representation of Mixed Heritage Site, a true amalgamation, where the nature is in plenty and at its best and culture can be witnessed in full bloom, with vividity and purity.

*Jai Mata Di*

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36. Mata Rani Sab theek kareingi: Mother Goddess would Render All Goodness.

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